

IS HEROIN OVER THE HILL?

The number of young people taking up heroin has for the first time in decades begun to fall. Is this the end of an era and what has been the driving force behind it? By **Harry Shapiro**

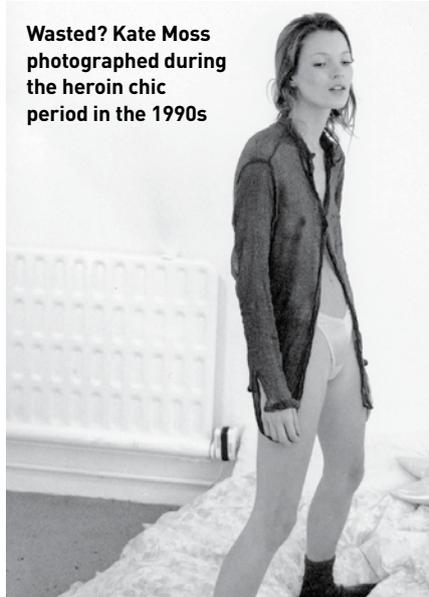
For the first time in living memory, there is evidence that the overall population of heroin users in England has fallen. Since the mid-1960s, when the use of heroin started to spread from the middle classes to young working class people, numbers rose steadily, with some plateaux until the early 1980s. Then a toxic mix of high youth unemployment and the arrival of smokeable heroin from the middle east, sent the numbers soaring, creating the problem we have been dealing with ever since. So why have the numbers started to fall?

There is plenty of evidence that drug use trends occur in cycles, fluctuating and returning for a variety of reasons, including availability, price, purity, enforcement activity and legislation. The arrival of new drugs, especially with substances on the recreational and clubbing scenes, is sometimes simply a question of fashion. LSD for example, is hardly available in the UK these days – a combination of the difficulty of getting hold of the necessary chemicals, the arrival of ecstasy and the greater use of magic mushrooms.

The 1980s crack epidemic in the USA largely blew itself out for reasons which academics still fail to agree upon. One very controversial observation, made in the 2005 book *Freakonomics*, was that the decision in the States to legalise abortion in 1973 meant that eventually fewer single women from poor communities were having unwanted children. By the early 1990s, say the book's authors, this led to a reduction in the numbers of potential teenage criminals, drug users and dealers needed to keep the crack epidemic on the boil.

If you were looking for a similar, albeit less dramatic upstream impact in the UK, you could point to the relatively prosperous period we enjoyed up to 2008, in comparison with the 1980s. Another factor could be the absence now of any

Wasted? Kate Moss photographed during the heroin chic period in the 1990s



notion of 'heroin chic', a 1990s concept of heroin use as sexy and fashionable, attributed to a mix of the media, music and fashion industries. Although how much impact these had on actual use is questionable. Even so, heroin use does not appear to be cool anymore, a point underlined by the general reaction of most young people to the chaotic lives of Pete Doherty and Amy Winehouse, whose behaviour was described as sad, rather than aspirational, by a group of teenagers quizzed by MPs in March 2008.

The treatment system too has played its part. The past decade has seen massive government investment which has created one of the most comprehensive and accessible treatment systems in the world, whatever its faults might be. According to the National Treatment Agency, we now have fewer people coming into heroin treatment. Those that do are getting older and more people are leaving treatment and not coming back.

At the other end of the age spectrum, very few young people are seeking treatment for heroin, but instead are doing so for alcohol and cannabis. This is a reflection of the changing pattern of problematic adolescent drug use. Now the vast majority, around 90 per cent are treated for cannabis and alcohol problems.

Generally, most levels of drug use in the general population, as shown by the British Crime Survey, are flat or in decline. Most notably, cannabis use among young people has been falling since 2002. Again, there is no obvious reason for this, but educated guesses would include the fact that with so much strong herbal cannabis around, weed has become too hot to handle for most young smokers. Maybe, with cannabis use more 'normalised' over the years, it is simply part of the repertoire of fashionable accessories that can be dropped on a whim. By contrast, the strength of current cannabis also helps to explain why those young people who are perhaps self-medicating problems with cannabis can develop serious problems.

With all the current gloomy prognosis about the economy, especially around youth unemployment, we may yet see an upswing in the problematic use of drugs. Yet the real elephant in the room is alcohol. It cannot be a coincidence that while young people might have been turning their backs on syringes, many have embraced the bottle with open arms – and mouths.

When the choice is between cheap, easily available, high strength spirits and the uncertainties, dangers and expensive of the illicit drug market, it is not difficult to understand why there is so much concern around teenage drinking. Whatever messages young people might have absorbed about drugs, those about alcohol are being drowned in a sea of cheap vodka.