

# Smack is back... but not here

The recent death of Phillip Seymour Hoffman has shed light on what appears to be a new heroin epidemic in America. Max Daly investigates.

Heroin use is on the wane in Britain. The battle against a drug that blighted many impoverished areas in the 1980s and 1990s appears to be won. To a large extent young people have turned their back on a substance that so visibly damaged the previous generation. In the UK's narcotic marketplace, low quality heroin is struggling to compete against an array of cheap, illicit market prescription medicines and bargain basement alcohol. But across the Atlantic, heroin is making a comeback.

In the US, the media and politicians have declared a nationwide heroin 'epidemic' which is finding fertile ground among America's middle classes.

The heroin-related deaths within the last 10 months of two well-loved actors, Phillip Seymour Hoffman and Corey Monteith, nailed the "scourge" to the very heart of America. Scores of towns, cities and states across the US have declared themselves 'heroin capitals'.

In January, Peter Shumlin, Governor of the east coast state of Vermont, one of the worst affected states in the US, devoted his entire annual 'State of the State' address to the heroin problem. He pointed out that nearly twice as many people in the state had died from heroin overdoses as the year before.

Since 2000, he said, Vermont, the second least populated state in the country with 626,000 residents, has seen an increase of more than 770 per cent in people seeking treatment for opiate addictions, up to 4,300 people in 2012.

"In every corner of our state, heroin and opiate-drug addiction threatens us," warned Shumlin. "The time has come for

us to stop quietly averting our eyes from the growing heroin addiction in our front yards."

In Massachusetts, another New England state that has been shocked by the rising presence of heroin among its citizens, Senator Edward Markey described a "meteoric rise in addiction to heroin." Similar warnings have been heard across the country, from Ohio to Louisiana and from Colorado back to the east coast, where sharp rises in heroin deaths have been reported from New Jersey up to Maine.

## FOUR OUT OF EVERY FIVE HEROIN USERS IN THE US HAS FORMERLY ABUSED PAINKILLERS

"We're seeing a resurgence of heroin," Gil Kerlikowske, director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, said. "It cuts across all demographic groups. We used to think of heroin as an inner city problem, but it's now a problem we're seeing across the nation among all populations and all ages."

What has made the rise in heroin use so difficult to swallow for the US is that it is a phenomenon that to a large extent has been driven by Big Pharma, rather than the usual suspects – foreign drug cartels. The scattergun prescription and widespread illicit diversion of opiate painkillers such as OxyContin over the last decade appears to have inadvertently created a fresh and

sizeable US market for street heroin.

Whether what is going on in America can or should be described as a heroin epidemic is highly debatable, but all the indications show that, unlike the UK, the US has certainly witnessed a rise in heroin use over the last decade.

The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), a door-knocking survey of homeowners similar to the annual Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW), found the total number of monthly heroin users in the US had jumped from 239,000 in 2010 to 335,000 in 2012, doubling since 2002. Around 0.3 per cent of the country's 314 million citizens had used the drug in the last year, compared to 0.2 per cent in 2002. Based on these figures, declaring a heroin 'epidemic' seems a little dramatic.

However, as research into heroin prevalence in the UK has shown, nationwide drug use surveys, as their authors admit themselves, are notoriously inefficient at head counting heroin users.

For example, the latest CSEW estimated there were 56,000 last year opiate users in England and Wales. However, more detailed research carried out for the Department of Health found this figure was five times higher – at 261,792 regular opiate users.

In an attempt to drill down to get a truer picture of the US heroin figures, researchers from the RAND Corporation used data from the Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring Program and then converted the statistics into nationally representative figures. Their conclusion was that rather than the US having



60,000 daily heroin users, as the national drug use statistics had found, the true figure was closer to one million.

Americans have not had to look far to find the root cause of this phenomenon.

In 2009, 257 million prescriptions for opioid painkillers such as OxyContin, the first drug of its kind to have a time-release mechanism that spaces out its effects over a longer period of time, were dispensed from retail pharmacies, a 48 percent increase from 2000.

The flood of relatively easy to get painkillers, especially in more rural areas where some doctors turned to painkillers as a cure for all, created a huge number of recreational users of these pills, which is why OxyContin is also known as 'hillbilly heroin'.

Unlike heroin use in America, the use of opioid painkillers has reached epidemic levels over the last 15 years. Since 1999 there has been a near four-fold increase in deaths from opioid painkillers, from 4,030 to 16,651 in 2010. During this time heroin deaths climbed from 1,960 to 3,036.

The net soon started closing in on OxyContin's manufacturer, Purdue Pharma. In 2007, the firm and three of its top executives were fined \$600 million after pleading guilty to misleading the health industry about the drug's risk of addiction.

Cowed by this, in 2010, Purdue caved in to pressure from the government to

reformulate the pills in order to make them harder to crush and snort.

It is this forced, but well-intentioned move that observers say switched thousands of addicted prescription pill users onto cheaper, more easily available heroin.

Figures from NSDUH support this theory. While the number of Americans abusing OxyContin fell from 566,000 in 2010 to 358,000 in 2012, the number of heroin users escalated. Four out of every five heroin users in the US has formerly abused painkillers: the direct opposite of what is going on in the UK.

Heroin dealing gangs from big cities such as New York and Boston were in the perfect position to provide the goods to all the out of town pill crushers who suddenly found themselves needing an opiate fix.

Dealers travelled up to New England and made a healthy profit. A \$5 bag was worth \$10 to \$30 up the coast – and was still less than an opiate pill. Former prescription painkiller users were able to return to an opiate hit that was relatively cheap and as it was beforehand, readily available.

In 'Effect of Abuse-Deterrent Formulation of OxyContin', a report which analysed the impact of the changes made to OxyContin pills, published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 2012, researchers concluded:

"Our data show that an abuse-

deterrent formulation successfully reduced abuse of a specific drug but also generated an unanticipated outcome: replacement of the abuse-deterrent formulation with alternative opioid medications and heroin, a drug that may pose a much greater overall risk to public health than OxyContin. Thus, abuse-deterrent formulations may not be the "magic bullets" that many hoped they would be in solving the growing problem of opioid abuse."

A study into US national drug overdoses following the introduction of the new pill, published last year in the journal, *Pharmacoepidemiology and Drug Safety*, found the change prompted a 36 per cent fall in OxyContin overdoses, but a 42 per cent increase in heroin overdoses.

The dishing out of opiate painkillers by American doctors, often on the behest of the manufacturers, sowed the seeds of this upturn in heroin use, by grooming a nation of opiate addicts.

As Wilson Compton, deputy director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse says: "When heroin users weren't able to obtain heroin, they'd use pills as a secondary substance," Compton says. "But what has been emerging is the trajectory from pill to heroin use."

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