

# The land that time forgot

The history of heroin prescription is a colourful tale of maverick doctors and moral outrage. **Chris Drouet**, who was a scripted heroin user in the 60s and 70s, describes an era of caring and chaos.

**E**VER since the passing into law under the Defence of the Realm Act in 1916, drug laws have become ever more punitive. Before then, anyone could walk into a chemist and buy heroin and cocaine over the counter, no questions asked. Section 40, paragraph B of the Act (nicknamed DORA 40 B) changed all that. In order to obtain heroin and cocaine a prescription must be presented, a poisons register had to be kept by the pharmacist stating who prescribed what to whom, all under fairly rigorous control by the Home Office. These prescriptions were not meant for the treatment of addiction.

The Department of Health's Rolleston Committee report in 1926 permitted the medical prescription of heroin to drug users – predominantly members of Britain's middle classes – after 'every effort' had been made "for the cure of addiction". This became known as the 'British System'.

## BENTLEY

With the 60s came a sudden upturn in the number of drug users. From 1959 to 1964 the number of registered opiate addicts leapt from 68 to 342. Moral panic was stirred up, mainly because many of these new heroin users were not upper class ladies but working class boys from Glasgow. It was into this melting pot that Lady Isabella Frankau, soon to become a legend among drug users of the time, jumped.

During the 1960s, Lady Frankau was one of only about 12 doctors in England who had a licence to prescribe heroin. Unlike some of her less scrupulous colleagues she wasn't just in it for the money – she happened to come from a very rich family – she did it out of a real care for her patients. She would often forego her fee when they had no money. Although a script cost only £2, one has to remember that the average weekly wage was then £15-£18, so it would roughly equate to the price of a script today.

There were many tales about Lady Frankau and the frontier days of heroin treatment in 1960s London. A rumour goes that one day in the very early 1960s, when heroin use was just taking off, a queue had formed outside Lady Frankau's surgery in Wimpole Street, central London due to her absence. It gradually lengthened round the block until mid-afternoon when she finally turned up. She had been attending the royal wedding of Princess Anne and Anthony Armstrong-Jones.

Many ex-users recount a period when, for reasons long forgotten, Lady Frank wrote prescriptions from the back of her Bentley. What is undeniable is that after returning from lecture tour of Canada about heroin prescribing, over 70 Canadian addicts followed her back to London for scripts.

Although the number of doctors prescribing heroin and cocaine scripts was small, some of them were prepared to wildly over-prescribe for their patients. And what their patients didn't use themselves found its way on to the street. In a fairly short time the number of addicts in London had multiplied considerably.

When Lady Frankau died in 1967, Dr John Petro took on most of her patients. He too cared about their health and, even though he was perhaps guilty of over-prescribing, he would dress and clean abscesses. Doctor Petro made the mistake of appearing on the David Frost Show and admitted over-prescribing to addicts – an act of career hari-kiri. Even after being struck off, he would sometimes be seen at Piccadilly Circus tending to addicts suffering from ulcers, abscesses and giving general health advice or writing scripts on paper napkins in Lyons Café in Baker Street tube station. One day he was writing scripts from the house of one of his patients with the patient's wife guarding the door. She admitted a total stranger who told her that she'd seen Petro in the past. The following Sunday, it was all over the News of the World.





**WILD FRONTIER**

This incident turned out to be the beginning of the end for him as he was now well and truly in the public eye. Compared to today's clinical system, this was an entirely different atmosphere: people were more laid back, but maybe this was because they had no idea of what was to come.

Believe it or not, it was a time when, if you were withdrawing, you could ask someone to lend you something until the following day when you were back on your feet again. They knew they would be repaid as the rip-off scene hadn't caught on. Of course, it wasn't long before rip-offs became fairly common if you weren't careful. Either the 'back in a flash' scenario after having given the your money in good faith, or the straight forward bashing.

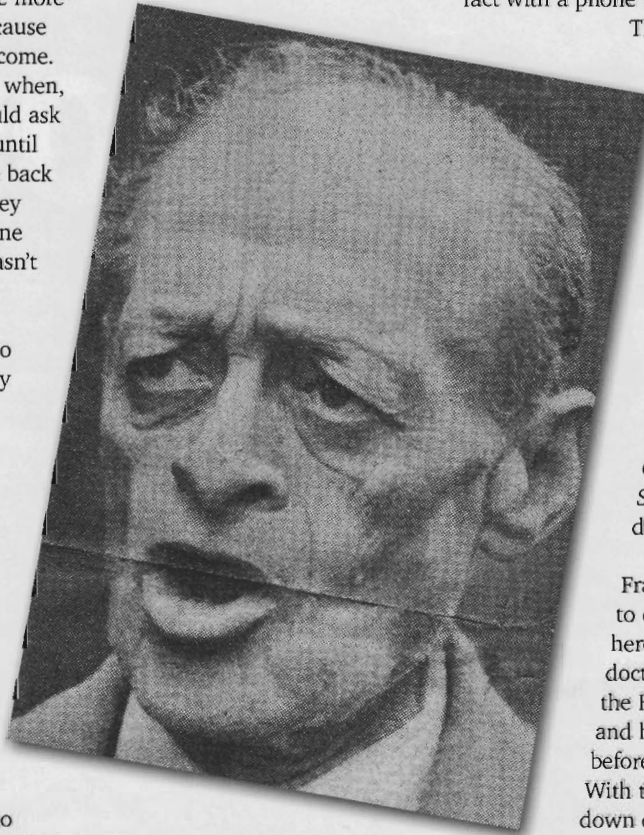
During this time in England there was no imported or smuggled heroin, it was all overspill from doctors. The thinking being that if doctors gave addicts the precise amount they needed there would be no overspill and no black-market. But as we have seen, doctors over prescribing kept a healthy black-market going.

It was not only the doctors who were mavericks. H B 'Bing' Spear joined the Home Office drugs branch in 1952. As he rose through the ranks, he made it his business to get to know the addicts on the street in London. Bing was familiar to the addicts who queued at midnight at Boots all-night chemist at Piccadilly Circus with scripts dated for the following day.

A friend of this writer joined the merchant navy after leaving school and in the course of doing so, visited ports all over the world. He jumped ship in Marseilles and soon found himself with a sizeable habit. He stayed there for three years and dearly wanted to return home but was afraid to do so due to his drug problem. He took advice from the British Embassy and was eventually put through to Bing Spear who met him on the dock-side at Dover with a script and with an arrangement for further appointments with a doctor.

**'DISASTER'**

By the late 60s Chinese heroin became available in the West End and it was of such good quality that some people were selling their 'scripts in order to buy it. Of course, the price escalated and the Drug Squad were very busy. In the early-mid 70s there were a couple of big conspiracy to supply busts, which more or less put paid to the Chinese scene. This made the Chinese very wary of dealing with English people as they were the main grasses and some quite lengthy custodial sentences were dished out. This left a gap in the market, and as we shall see, didn't take long to fill.



**STRUCK OFF:**  
Doctor Petro

**Doctor Petro made the mistake of appearing on the David Frost Show and admitted over-prescribing to addicts – an act of career hari-kiri.**

In 1967 there were 1,053 heroin addicts 'known to the Home Office', as at that time a 'register' was kept. If you were stopped by the police in possession of a script, telling them that you were 'registered' allowed them to verify this fact with a phone call to the Home Office.

This system is now defunct.

That year, by which time Spear had risen to become Chief Inspector of the Home Office Drugs Branch, was a watershed year for the treatment of addicts: GPs lost the right to prescribe heroin and the 'clinic system' was introduced. This was, in the words of Bing Spear (in his book *Heroin Addiction, Care and Control: The British System*) "an unmitigated disaster".

With the demise of Drs Frankau and Petro, addicts had to obtain their pharmaceutical heroin somewhere. A crop of doctors, mainly psychiatrists in the Harley Street area sprang up and having seen what had gone before, were much more discreet. With the Home Office clamping down on heroin prescribing the only real alternative was injectable methadone prescribing. Even though this new crop of private doctors,

although more discreet than their forebears, soon became known through word of mouth and it wasn't too long before they had more patients than they could handle, as well as attention from the police. There were numerous strikings-off during the 70s and 80s, the majority for irresponsible prescribing.

**NEW ERA**

With this hole created by doctors no longer being allowed to prescribe, a gateway was opened up for smugglers of heroin from the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan mainly. When the Shah of Iran was deposed in 1979 the Iranians brought their wealth to this country in the form of heroin – one of the major factors behind the massive black-market of today's proportions.

The talk now is that GPs should once more be able to prescribe heroin to addicts, cutting out all this clinic nonsense. Picking up a heroin script twice or maybe even three times a week would allow the user to hold down a steady job if the dose was what he or she required. Not enough to sell some on, but enough to get them through the day. There were encouraging words coming from ex-Home Secretary David Blunkett, but now that he's gone, who knows what will happen. Historically, the Conservatives have done more for addicts than the Labour Party. ●