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"DOPE FIEND" MYTHOLOGY

A. R. Lindesmith¹

During the last fifty or so years there has grown up in the United States a body of stereotyped misinformation about 'drug addicts.'² Sensational articles and newspaper accounts have harped upon the theme of the 'dope-crazed killer' or the 'dope fiend rapist' until the public has learned to depend upon this sort of literature as it depends upon the output of fanciful detective mysteries. The fact that the monstrous persons depicted exist mainly as figments of the imagination does not alter the fact that this mythology plays an important role in determining the way in which drug addicts are handled. Among serious students of the problem and among others who have some actual first hand contact with drug users, as for example prison officials, it has always been recognized that the American public is singularly misinformed on this subject. Nevertheless, the organization of the machinery of justice that deals with this problem is more directly based upon the superstitions of the man on the street than

it is upon anything that has been done in the name of impartial and objective analysis. It is the purpose of this paper to indicate and examine some of these popular fallacies, to analyze their function, and to point to the obstacles that stand in the way of a more realistic appraisal of the problem.

Drug addicts are often regarded as the most dangerous and heinous criminals and are linked up with killing and rape. This delusion has been smashed so many times that it is useless to devote serious attention to it.³ Suffice it to say that students of drug addiction have always been in unanimous agreement that the crimes of rape and murder are rarely committed by drug users. Every publication of crime statistics proves this over and over again for anyone who cares to read.⁴ Likewise it has been known in this country for almost a century that the principal drugs of addiction, opium and its derivatives, inhibit rather than stimulate the sex function. The drug addict is ordinarily not interested in

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² This article will be concerned only with the users of opiate drugs. Marihuana and cocaine users represent an entirely different problem. One of the reasons for confusion in this field is that the users of totally different types of drugs are not distinguished. The bad reputation of the opiate user is earned for him in part by the cocaine and marihuana users.

³ See, e.g. Dr. Lawrence Kolb, "Drug Addiction in Relation to Crime." *Mental Hygiene* IX (1925), p. 74ff. Also, Terry and Pellens, *The Opium Problem*, 1928.

⁴ See page 12 of the annual report on the *Traffic in Opium and Other Dangerous Drugs for the Year Ended December 31, 1936*, by the Bureau of Narcotics. Also see Supplement No. 143 to the *Public Health Reports*, "A Statistical Analysis of the Clinical Records of Hospitalized Drug Addicts," by Michael J. Pescor.

sex and is frequently virtually impotent. The overwhelming proportion of law violations committed by drug users is made up of violations of the narcotic laws and petty offenses against property.⁵

The drug user must, of course, violate the narcotic laws. While it is technically true that the use of drugs is not in and of itself a crime, nevertheless, in practice the addict is treated as a criminal and the laws which hedge about him make it virtually impossible for him to avoid violating the narcotic laws daily. His thieving activities are very simply explained in terms of the prices he pays for his drugs. It is frequently estimated that the average cost of a drug habit in this country is somewhere between two and five dollars a day. One must add to this the fact that the drug user must spend a large proportion of his time maintaining his contacts with the peddlers. This means that if he is to maintain a habit he must find some means of making money quickly. The three principal methods utilized by American addicts are theft, prostitution, and drug peddling.

In general, drug users are harmless and not at all dangerous, except that they steal. They rarely carry guns. A gun to most addicts would simply mean another object which could be sold or pawned in order to buy another "bundle of junk." The G men who deal with criminals like Dillinger

have dangerous occupations, but the narcotic agent who deals with addicts does not. The vengeance of the drug peddler is directed mainly toward the stool pigeon or informer, not toward the agent. A few years ago a Chicago drug peddler, who was not himself an addict, shot and killed an addict named Max Dent. He did so because the latter had betrayed him to the law. In the terms of the underworld he was a 'rat' and according to the code of the underworld no treatment is too harsh for such a person. It is probable that of the relatively few murders attributed to drug law violators many are of this type. The general public has nothing of this kind to fear. Now and then someone will have his pocket picked or other property stolen by a drug user, and frequently the prostitute is a drug user but the principal depredations of drug addicts are carried out in stores, and particularly in the large department stores of our cities, where the opportunities for shop lifting are at maximum.

The public stands in virtually no danger of violence at the hands of drug users, except in those relatively rare instances when a user of the drug happens, for example, to be at the same time a professional holdup man. However, addiction is rather infrequent among underworld characters who utilize force or the threat of it. It is more common among such types as pickpockets and shop lifters and other

⁵ Thus the Annual report of the Bureau of Narcotics for 1936, summarizes approximately 13,000 felonies committed by 4,975 drug users. Of this total, about one-sixth of one per cent, or 23 cases, are classified as "murder or man-

slaughter" and rape is not even listed. In contrast, 8427 of the felonies were classified as "narcotic convictions," 1898 as "miscellaneous," 1313 "grand larceny," 609 "burglary," 278 "felonious assault," 278 "highway robbery," 100 "concealed weapons," and 87 "forgery."

types that do not resort to violence. Even in those cases when an addict is also a gunman the danger resides, not in the use of the narcotics, but in the presence of the gun. The use of narcotics probably inhibits more than it encourages the use of violence.

The most substantial effect of the narcotic problem upon the public is the economic one. Aside from direct theft from private citizens, the public pays for the cost of the user's expensive habit and supports the underworld illicit traffic in opiates—one of the big and profitable industries of our country. It does so when it shoulders part of the losses from thefts from merchants when these merchants succeed in passing these losses on to their patrons. The contributions of respectable citizens to prostitutes also frequently serve to give financial support to the illicit traffic. In addition the public pays for the enforcement of the laws and the penal institutions in which addicts are incarcerated. Instead of being concerned over this invisible and unnecessary form of taxation in the interests of an underworld business the public has permitted itself to become aroused and indignant over dangers which are often fictitious.

It is often thought that addicts are easily recognizable either by reason of peculiar irresponsible behavior or unusual external appearances or both. This notion is false. Medical men often find it impossible to detect the drug user even after a thorough physical examination. Thus Chopra, a student

of addiction in India, who has had experience with thousands of drug users, asserts,

We know from our extensive experience with opium addicts in India, that it is impossible to detect a person taking opium in small or in moderate quantities, even after a careful physical examination.⁶

E. S. Bishop, a prominent American medical authority states that if an addict maintains good elimination "he will escape detection."⁷ Even when an addict uses large quantities of drugs the matter of determining that fact is often very difficult, the only sure way being to catch him in the act of using it or to find actual traces of the drug in his body. The drug addict driving a car is not a dangerous person—not nearly as dangerous as the respectable citizen who has had a couple cocktails or a few glasses of beer. Assuming that the addict has his usual dose there is no evidence to indicate that his skill at driving a car would be any greater if he were not using the drug. Moreover, it is quite well known that many drug users have carried on for many years in occupations requiring skill and intelligence, as for example, the medical profession.

There are certain external indications of drug addiction but none of these signs is reliable.⁸ In fact, it is one of the most remarkable things about drug addiction that the steady use of opiate drugs produces virtually no known significant pathological symptoms. In a recent authoritative study conducted by well known bio-

⁶ *The Indian Journal of Medical Research* XX, p. 561.

⁷ *The Narcotic Drug Problem*, MacMillan, 1921,

p. 47.

⁸ I refer to the external appearance of the skin and to the reactions of the eye.

chemists, medical men and physiologists, the results of which were published by The American Medical Association, the following assertions are made:

The study shows that morphine addiction is not characterized by physical deterioration or impairment of physical fitness aside from the addiction per se. There is no evidence of change in the circulatory, hepatic, renal or endocrine functions. When it is considered that these subjects had been addicted for at least five years, some of them for as long as twenty years, these negative observations are highly significant.⁹

The same authors state,

In a few recognized cases of opium addiction that have come to autopsy, whether the drug was being taken at the time of death or not, the pathologic changes found have been insignificant.¹⁰

Concerning the emaciated appearance of some addicts which has sometimes been assumed to be characteristic of drug users these authorities state,

We believe that the existence of considerable emaciation in certain cases is caused by the unhygienic and impoverished life of the addict rather than by the direct effects of the drug.¹¹

Other students have reached similar conclusions. Thus Terry and Pellens, after an exhaustive and critical examination of an extensive literature assert,

Only in cases where large doses of the drug are being consumed can casual observation or even a fairly careful examination determine the existence of the condition. . . . It has been reported that for many years husbands and wives, to say nothing of other members of the family, have lived in complete ignorance

of the existence of this condition in one or the other and that quite possible the average physician, unaccustomed to dealing with the condition, might have difficulty in determining its existence.¹²

In view of the above results of research, the belief that a drug addict automatically becomes a moral degenerate, liar, thief, etc., because of the direct influence of the drug, is simply nonsense quite on a par with a belief in witchcraft. It is true that many American addicts belong to underworld or semi-underworld groups and that their behavior, from the viewpoint of a respectable citizen, is often despicable and reprehensible, but is it also true that there are many drug addicts, even in the United States, whose behavior does not fall in these categories and who maintain their self-respect and social status. There is no necessary or invariable connection between the taking of any kind of drug and moral degeneration. This fact is brought out by the consideration of the way in which wealthy addicts with political influence manage to protect themselves from arrest and detection and from a loss of social status. As Dr. Lichtenstein states,

To call addiction a disease when applied to the wealthy, and a vice when referring to the underworld addict is nothing short of criminal, and such distinction serves but to becloud the situation and to interfere with the ultimate solution of the problem. At present a poor addict is an underworld addict. . . . We as physicians have no right to refuse treatment to the poor addict. Similarly,

state, "In spite of frequently repeated statements that the use of opium and its derivatives causes mental and ethical degeneration in all cases, we are inclined to believe that this alleged effect has not been established."

⁹ *Opium Addiction*, 1929, p. 115.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 19.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 20.

¹² *Op. Cit.* p. 2. On page 514 these authors

hospitals have no right to refuse such people treatment, and we, the general public, are entirely to blame if by forcing the addict to take treatment in a penal institution, we make of him a criminal,—and that is exactly what we are doing.¹³

In other words, it is not the effect of the drug that produces the alleged deterioration of character in the addict, but rather the social situations into which he is forced by the law and by the public's conception of addiction which does the damage. Well-to-do addicts who are in a position to protect themselves against these influences often live useful and productive lives.

It is beyond question that most of the addicts who are arrested and imprisoned in the United States belong to the poor and helpless class known as the "underworld group." Thus W. L. Treadway reports that a total of 2,407 narcotic law violators studied, a little more than one-third or 925 were regularly employed. Of the same total only about one-seventh, or 352, were reported to have been in "comfortable" economic circumstances before arrest.¹⁴ It is sometimes assumed that this situation is inevitable and natural, but statistical data from other countries reveal that such is not the case. In Formosa, for example, in 1905 more than 90% of the addicts are reported as having regular occupations and about seventy per cent were reported as mar-

ried and living with their families.¹⁵ R. N. Chopra, speaking of addicts in India states,

Our cases comprised of a fairly large number of good citizens, agriculturists who were working like normal individuals without any appreciable change in their social behavior.¹⁶

This author also notes a tendency for members of the underworld to seek regular employment and to leave the underworld when they become addicts. It should be remembered that addicts in India are not regarded or treated as criminals. Chopra has the following general comment to make on Indian opium users,

Opium addicts in this country are not liars or moral wrecks as has been ascribed by some authors elsewhere. Some of our addicts were upright, straight forward and self-respecting individuals. We have observed that moderate consumers of the drug and a majority of those taking even larger doses are generally inoffensive to society. . . . The opium addicts in India are not much objected to by the people at large, but persons taking large doses of the drug, and those who smoke opium, are shunned by respectable citizens lest their children and youths should acquire the habit by force of example. The harm done by an opium addict is mainly confined to himself and not to society.¹⁷

Chopra found that about two-thirds of Indian addicts showed no appreciable changes in their general behavior as a consequence of the habit, and described the changes in the other one-third of

¹³ Appendix 12 of *Documentation of Fifth Annual Conference of Committees of the World Narcotic Defence Association and International Narcotic Education Association* held in New York in 1932.

¹⁴ "Some Epidemiological Features of Drug Addiction," *British Journal of Inebriety*, XXVIII (1930), pp. 50-54.

¹⁵ A. Hischman, *Die Opiumfrage*. 1912. p. 46.

¹⁶ "The Opium Habit in India," *Indian Journal of Medical Research* XV (1927).

¹⁷ *Ibid.* See also the other articles by this author in the same journal and also in *The Indian Medical Gazette*.

the cases as being mainly of very minor character.¹⁸

If our addicts appear to be moral degenerates and thieves it is we who have made them that by the methods we have chosen to apply to their problem. By making it impossible for drug users to obtain low cost legitimate drugs we have created a huge illicit traffic and impoverished the addict. The price of illicit drugs is ordinarily estimated at anywhere from ten to twenty times the cost of legitimate drugs. It is in the desperate attempt of the drug user to meet these enormous prices that he resorts to theft and prostitution. If we were to set about deliberately to produce thieves and prostitutes we could scarcely improve on this situation.

It may be argued that addicts are thieves and prostitutes before becoming addicts, and no doubt that is sometimes true. A number of investigations, indicate, however, that more than half of our addicts have no criminal records of any kind prior to addiction.¹⁹ An English writer correctly appraised our situation when he wrote,

In the United States of America a drug habitué is regarded as a malefactor, even though the habit has been acquired through the medicinal use of the drug, as in the case, e.g., of American soldiers who were gassed or otherwise maimed

in the Great War. The Harrison Narcotic Law was passed in 1914 by the Federal Government of the United States with general popular approval. It placed severe restrictions upon the sale of narcotics and upon the medical profession, and necessitated the appointment of a whole army of officials. In consequence of this stringent law a vast clandestine commerce in narcotics has grown up in that country. The small bulk of these drugs renders the evasion of the law comparatively easy, and the country is overrun by an army of peddlers who extort exorbitant prices from their hapless victims. It appears that not only has the Harrison Law failed to diminish the number of drug takers—some contend, indeed, that it has increased their numbers—but, far from bettering the lot of the opiate addict, it has actually worsened it; for without curtailing the supply of the drug it has sent up the price tenfold, and this has had the effect of impoverishing the poorer class of addicts and reducing them to a condition of such abject misery as to render them incapable of gaining an honest livelihood.²⁰

The whole blame for addiction is sometimes placed upon the shoulders of the well known "bogey man," the dope peddler, who is blamed for spreading the habit for the alleged purpose of extending his market.²¹ In this connection it should be remembered that the peddler depends upon the enormous prices which he is able to obtain. The situation which makes these prices possible is created directly by our present laws. Prospects of profits of

¹⁸ See also A. R. Lindesmith, "A Sociological Theory of Drug Addiction," *American Journal of Sociology*, XIiii (1938), pp. 593-609, for material on the "normality" of the drug user.

¹⁹ Thus Michael J. Pescor (*op. cit.*) makes this statement on the basis of the results of the study of 1,036 cases, "If the addict is basically a criminal, it is likely that he would have committed anti-social acts prior to his addiction; yet three-fourths of the patients had no delinquency record prior to addiction." (p. 8.) Substantially the

same result is reported by Bingham Dai, *Opium Addiction in Chicago*, Shanghai, 1937.

²⁰ Harry Campbell, "The Pathology and Treatment of Morphia Addiction," *British Journal of Inebriety* XX (1923), 147-8.

²¹ Even Terry and Pellens are guilty of repeating this sort of thing of peddlers (*op. cit.*, p. 87). They also say that peddlers give away enough of the drug to addict a person and then charge enough to make up for their losses. No evidence has been produced to show that this sort of thing is actually done.

more than a thousand per cent inevitably attract business talent in a country like ours. Peddlers and smugglers in such a situation are quite inevitable—just as inevitable as bootleggers in prohibition era. The drug peddler does not create this situation, he only takes advantage of the opportunities that are presented.²²

The peddler of drugs, contrary to a widespread belief, does not ordinarily attempt to induce non-users to try the drug. Isolated instances of this may occur, but the general rule is quite the opposite. The reasons for this are obvious once they are considered, and it is not because the peddler is virtuous and innocent—he is far from that. He does not try to seduce non-users because it does not pay and because it is too dangerous. The ordinary peddler who makes the actual contacts with consumers leads a very precarious existence outside of prison living in constant fear of the law. He is arrested and evidence against him is obtained through the use of drug using stool pigeons posing as bona fide customers.²³ Addict informers must be used for this purpose because peddlers have long since learned the elementary fact that if they did no business with non-addicts it would be impossible for the narcotic agent to obtain direct

evidence unaided. If peddlers attempted to extend their markets to non-users they would facilitate their own arrest. The sentences imposed upon them in such circumstances would also certainly be more severe than they otherwise are.

Inducing non-addicts to try the drug is not profitable because the non-user is not initially interested in paying the high prices. Peddlers can not give away quantities of the drug sufficient to establish addiction and stay in the business. The drug user is in the business for profit and usually to maintain his own habit. The product he handles often brings as much as \$200 an ounce—several times its weight in gold. He can no more afford to give it away than a jeweler can afford to give away diamonds. Moreover, most of the peddlers who are arrested and sent to prison are poor. According to W. Treadway, of a group of 2,407, 2,055 were not in comfortable economic circumstances prior to arrest.²⁴ They were, in other words, what is known as "boots" or "boot and shoe dope fiends." Persons of this type living from hand to mouth and spending a large proportion of their time in penal institutions are in no position to give anything away or to take any unnecessary risks.

²² The implication is clear. The way to eliminate the peddler is to eliminate his profit.

²³ This use of addicted informers is one of the unfortunate and unpublicized aspects of the enforcement of narcotic laws. The informer uses some of the money which he is paid by the government to buy illicit drugs from peddlers whom he has not betrayed to the law. It is stated that in the past local Narcotic Bureaus actually themselves doled out the drug to the informers working for them. The practice of using stool

pigeons has the effect of placing some of the responsibility for the way in which the law is enforced upon one of the most despised underworld types.

²⁴ *Locus cited.* This indicates the significant fact that the profits of the drug traffic do not end up in the pockets of the people who are sent to prison for peddling drugs. It may safely be asserted that the persons who profit from the drug traffic are not addicts and that they do not spend much time in prison.

The large scale smuggler and peddler likewise cannot promote the wider use of drugs because he must keep the nature of his business secret. He extends his market by "muscling in" on someone else's business and lets the spread of the habit take care of itself, knowing that with our laws as they are and with human beings what they are there will always be those who will permit their curiosity to overcome their judgment and keep the market lively.²⁵

Another current myth is that all addicts, in accordance with the proverb that "misery loves company," have a positive mania for making new addicts. This is nothing but gratuitous slander of an unfortunate and helpless group. This particular myth is current in the United States, but it is curiously absent in other countries of the world. Drug addicts have been observed and studied for at least three-quarters of a century in this country and in Europe, but the idea that each addict makes it his purpose to obtain new recruits is emphasized only in one country—the United States. In England France, Germany, Russia, India, etc., it has not been noticed.²⁶ Throughout the nineteenth century it was not noticed in the United States either.²⁷ Curiously enough this myth appears to have only local circulation and a very recent origin.

²⁵ It would be positively silly to suppose that the late Rothstein of New York, who is reputed to have made a great deal of his fortune through handling drugs, would have taken the risk of urging the habit upon someone so as to increase his profit by a few dollars.

²⁶ The literature offers instances in which addicts have deliberately imposed the habit upon someone but they are rare, and as far as I know no competent student of addiction in European

It is true that people become addicts through association with persons who are already addicted, but that does not mean that the user deliberately makes an addict of the non-user. It is through contacts with the user of the drug that the non-addict has his curiosity aroused to the point where he wants to experiment with the drug. Frequently, probably usually, the beginner is warned solemnly against the dangers involved, but he goes ahead in spite of these warnings, believing in his own powers of resistance. The inconsistency of the attempt to blame the addict for making new addicts is indicated by the fact that, once addicted, no one is inclined to excuse the addict on the grounds that he was innocently lured into the habit by another user. In fact, quite a different position is taken. Not only is the user blamed for spreading the habit but the new addict is immediately declared to be fully responsible for his own addiction and is punished accordingly.

The assumption that all addicts try to spread the habit is given as a justification for imprisoning them under the erroneous assumption that the habit cannot be spread in prison. However, if this is a reason for incarcerating the drug user he should be tried in court for that offence. Evidence should be presented to prove that he has in fact

countries has ever maintained that all or most, or even many addicts, sought to do this.

²⁷ See Calkins, *Opium and the Opium Appetite*, Philadelphia, 1871. This is one of the most informative books of the nineteenth century on this subject. Literally hundreds of cases are cited and many different shades of opinion are discussed but the idea under consideration had obviously not occurred to anyone at that time.

attempted to induce a non-addict to become an addict. The victims of venereal disease also sometimes deliberately infect others but that is not regarded as an excuse for sending all the victims of this disease to prison.

Drug addicts in the United States are punished for being addicts. The establishment of narcotic farms has been a gesture in another direction, but is essentially futile as long as the general social and legal situation of the drug user remains what it is. Regardless of attempts to pretend otherwise the narcotic farms are regarded as prisons by the addicts. They are places where one "does time." The addict who earnestly wishes to break his habit has virtually no other course open to him except to go to prison—unless, of course, he has money. Sending the addict to prison serves no useful purpose. In fact, the stigma of the prison sentence with its resultant social disgrace and loss of employment and position and the extensive acquaintanceships with drug users and peddlers established in prison, merely aggravates the plight of addict when he is released and makes it harder for him to break away from his habit.²⁸

A. M. Turano, in an excellent article on addicts entitled "Punishment for Disease," summarized the official attitude toward treating addicts, as follows,

²⁸ Thus there is a population of about 1600 at the Annex of the Fort Leavenworth Penitentiary. Assuming that there are about 100 new cases admitted each month, an inmate has the opportunity of meeting 2800 drug peddlers and addicts in the course of a year. When released he may meet former prison comrades in almost any city in the United States and each such meeting represents a temptation to resume the use of the

Thus it appears, on the whole, that in begrudgingly offering medical care, the law stands at the bedside of the addict as a fumbling nurse with healing balm in one hand and a primitive tomahawk in the other, unable to decide whether to attack the disease or punish its owner for having acquired it.²⁹

As August Vollmer says, "Drug addiction . . . is not a police problem; it never has been, and never can be solved by policemen."³⁰

Why then does the situation continue as it is? It is at this point that the mythology surrounding drug addiction plays its part. An ideology, based on the distortion and misrepresentation of fact, has been given a veneer of plausibility, which has made it attractive as well as exciting to the man on the street. This ideology serves to justify the severe treatment generally accorded the drug user, and is utilized by vested interests to frighten the public into appropriating more and more funds to combat the great "dope menace." Solemn discussions are carried on about lengthening the addict's already long sentence and as to whether or not he is a good parole risk. The basic question as to why he should be sent to prison at all is scarcely mentioned. Eventually, it is to be hoped that we shall come to see, as most of the civilized countries of the world have seen, that the punishment and imprisonment of addicts is as cruel and pointless as

drug. This situation also facilitates the peddling of drugs and entry into other criminal occupations.

²⁹ *The American Mercury* XXXVI, December, 1935.

³⁰ *The Police and Modern Society*, Berkeley, 1936, p. 118. See also, Harry Elmer Barnes, *Society in Transition*, 1939, on this problem.

similar treatment for persons infected with syphilis would be.

However, if we are to continue to punish the drug user for his misfortune, turning him over to the tender mercies of policemen for "treatment," the mythology we have described will be useful. We can continue to offer him the haven of a penitentiary instead of a hospital and justify ourselves by pointing out that, after all, he deserves nothing better. Besides being a vicious and degenerate person seeking to infect others, he is naturally inclined toward theft, prostitution, and any crime whatever. If we throw him into prison he will only be able to spread the habit to other prisoners. The final ironic touch is the argument

that the incarceration of addicts deprives peddlers of their market. On this basis all honest persons should be thrown into prison so that pickpockets would have only each other to steal from.

The "dope fiend" mythology serves, in short, as a rationalization of the status quo. It is a body of superstition, half-truths and misinformation which bolsters up an indefensible repressive law, the victims of which are in no position to protest. The treatment of addicts in the United States today is on no higher plane than the persecution of witches of other ages, and like the latter it is to be hoped that it will soon become merely another dark chapter of history.