

## INITIATION OF HEROIN ABUSE : THE ROLE OF PEERS

ARABINDA N. CHOWDHURY<sup>1</sup> AND PIYAL SEN<sup>2</sup>

*A study comprising of detail history collection of first - day heroin chasing of 80 heroin addicts in respect to the contribution of their peers was done. Analysis reveals that the peer group influence was significantly operative in several ways in the initiation of heroin abuse.*

The relative importance of peers in adolescent drinking and drug abuse is an issue of debate in the literature since long (Gorsuch and Butler, 1976; Wilks, 1988). It has been postulated that peers play an important role in affecting drug using attitudes and behaviours among young drug abusers. Different studies placed importance on different dimensions of peer influence, viz. as sources of initial drugs (Huba and Bentler, 1980); as initiators to drug abuse (Schneider *et al.*, 1977); as a source of encouragement (Partrey, 1977) etc. Some studies also stressed the supremacy of peer influence over the influence of siblings or parents in drug seeking behavior (Mohan *et al.*, 1981; Clayton and Lacy, 1982) and implicated this powerful effect on the epidemic spread of drug abuse (De Alarcon, 1969).

The present study is an attempt to examine the role of peers in the initial drug (heroin) abuse in a group of heroin addicts.

### MATERIAL AND METHOD

#### SAMPLE:

The study group composed of 80 heroin abusers, taken randomly from a prospective pool of heroin addicts (n = 167), who registered at the UNFDAC Nodal Centre for Drug Abuse Prevention, Institute of Psychiatry, Calcutta, during the period from July '90 to April '91.

The age range of the group was 21.67 + 6.39 years, with a mean duration of heroin addiction 2.13 + 1.04 years. 80% of the sample were single and 20% were married. By religion 76% were Hindu, 21% Muslim and 3% Christian.

#### METHOD:

The detailed history of first day heroin abuse was recorded in a structured interview format, of which seven items (first introduction of heroin; first heroin information; first day team, cost and location choice; first day location and reasons for heroin chasing) were concerned about the peer role. These data was

presented here. Statistical treatment of the data was done by using Chi-square analysis and normal approximation of binomial distribution.

### RESULTS

Table 1 shows the frequency distribution of first source of heroin information and the person who introduced heroin on the first day of heroin abuse. Both shows a significant ( $p < .01$ ) distribution as follows : highest number of cases (46.2%) received the first heroin information from their friends, followed by 23.7% from relatives; 11.3% from peddlers and 18.8% from mass media sources. In maximum number of cases (60%) first day heroin was introduced by friends, followed by 21.3% by workmates; 10% by peddlers and 8.7% procured the heroin by themselves.

Table 1. First information and introduction of heroin

	Information N (%)	Introduction N (%)
Friends	37 (46.2)	48 (60)
Relatives	19 (23.7)	-
Workmates	-	17 (21.3)
Peddler	9 (11.3)	8 (10)
Mass-Media	15 (18.8)	-
Self	-	7 (8.7)
$\chi^2_{3, d.f. (3)}$	21.8*	50.3

\*  $p < .01$

Table 2 shows the contribution of friends in first day of heroin abuse so far as the team, cost and the location choice were concerned. Significant ( $p < .01$ ) number of cases abused heroin in groups (mean group member was  $4.7 \pm 1.4$  persons) and the location was identified by friends.

**Table 2. First-day team, Cost and Location Choice**

No (%)	Team		Cost paid		Location choice	
	Alone	Group	Self	Friend	Self	Friend
8 (10)	72 (90)*	44 (55)	36 (45)	25 (31.3)	55 (68.7)*	

\*  $p < .01$ 

Table 3 shows the location of first heroin abuse. Public places were preferred most (36.3%), followed by friend's house (32.5%), worksite (16.2%) and own house (15%). This distribution was significant ( $p < .01$ ).

**Table 3. Location of First Heroin Chasing**

	N (%)
Public Place	29 (36.3)
Friend's House	26 (32.50)
Worksite	13 (16.2)
Own House	12 (15.0)

 $\chi^2 = 11.5$ , d.f. = 3,  $p < .01$ 

Table 4 shows the reasons of heroin abuse as conveyed by the addicts. The response pattern shows a significant ( $P < .01$ ) distribution as follows: Friends' request headed the list (37.5%) followed by curiosity (35%), to seek pleasure (20%) and trial of a new addiction (7.5%).

**Table 4. Reason for Heroin Chasing**

	N (%)
Friend's request	30 (37.5)
Curiosity	28 (35)
To seek pleasure	16 (20)
New addiction trial	6 (7.50)

 $\chi^2 = 18.8$ , d.f. = 3,  $p < .01$ 

## DISCUSSION

The peer group influence has been evidenced in several contexts of the initiation of heroin abuse in this study. Friends were identified as the persons who intro-

duced the drug first, first day abuse was in a group setting consisting of friends. Location selection and friend's house for the first day abuse is noteworthy. Further, friend's role topped the list of the source of first heroin information. This peer group influence is also important in the reasons for heroin chasing where the maximum cases implicated friend's request as the reason for first day experimentation.

Hatterer (1985) stated that peer group influence is a strong motivator in triggering the mechanism of drug taking behaviour. He implicated the role of encouragement, acceptance, peer value and group identification in the peer process which accelerate the initial drug abuse. He also pointed out that peer group influence in the initiation of drug abuse is found to be one of the two most frequent variables in the order of importance in studies of 27 countries. A study in Singapore also showed the positive role of peers in the initiation of drug abuse (Ong, 1989).

The present investigation highlights this peer group influence in the initiation of heroin abuse and thus strengthens the concept of peer pressure as one of the significant variables in the drug seeking behaviour.

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