Opium: A Blessing and a Curse

A drug with two faces, opium is both a dangerous recreational drug and nature’s best form of pain relief.
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Programme running: 3 x 30 mins        Production: Nomad

For Pleasure and For Pain

Opiate drugs, usually associated with drug abusers and addicts, are linked to international politics, economics, crime, war and terrorism. Yet despite their dangers, opiates are still some of the most effective pain relievers, crucial to the treatment of severe pain and terminal illnesses.

The painkilling and pleasure-giving effects of opium have been known and celebrated in ancient cultures for millennia. With the invention of the hypodermic syringe during the American Civil War, opiates really came into their own as both powerful pain killers on the battlefield and as drugs of abuse and addiction.

In the West, prescription drug addicts develop the same sly and dishonest behaviour that is typically associated with “street junkies”, in their quest for drugs. However, the consequences are very different depending on the user’s race and class.

Traders and Traffickers

Today it is Afghanistan that is synonymous with the War on Drugs and the War on Terror, but it hasn’t always been that way. A trade war with China in the mid 19th century made the British Empire the biggest drug traffickers in the world.

The British addiction to tea caused the Opium Wars. Britain wanted to import enormous amounts of tea from China, but there was very little that the Chinese wanted in return. Britain searched for a commodity to trade, and finally tempted the Chinese with opium from Britain’s plantations in India.

Nowadays, the major producers and distributors of opiates in Afghanistan sell their drugs packaged, branded and labelled with guarantees, mimicking the marketing of legal forms of the drug. Yet the legitimate companies are in trouble themselves for aggressive marketing, which left hundreds of people needlessly addicted to the opiate based pain killer Oxycontin.

The War on Drugs

The evidence from the streets around the world is causing people to question the War on Drugs. Started for political reasons by US President Richard Nixon, some former narcotics officers are convinced that the crack down has actually encouraged the kind of networks that produce crime and violence. Is it possible to completely wipe out drug addiction?

In Afghanistan, poppy growers are turning against NATO forces, as the farmers have no other way to feed their families when their crops are destroyed. The War on Drugs has also affected access to legal opiates for medicinal use. This has created a huge work load for medical staff and has left patients in unnecessary pain.

Images: Valeriy Velikov (cover) and Martin Němec (poppy head).

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