

HEALTH

24 hours that could change your life

Tessa Thomas reports on a rapid
programme for heroin withdrawal

TWO WEEKS AGO John Van de Veld walked out of hospital and started a new life. A week before, he was just another statistic in the sad saga of drug addiction. A heroin addict for six years, he had been trying to quit for the past two and was taking methadone, a commonly prescribed synthetic narcotic and painkiller.

"Nothing really helped. Then my mother read in the local Antwerp paper about a 24 hour cure being offered at a clinic in Spain. I was very sceptical, but it was worth trying anything." At the time John, a 26 year old building restoration worker, was down from 8g to 50mg of heroin a day, but was consuming a dozen tranquillisers, a bottle of gin and three packets of cigarettes a day "just to cope".

The radical new treatment, formulated by Juan José Legarda at the Centre for Psychological Research and Treatment in Seville, involves sedating patients and detoxifying them, concentrating a withdrawal procedure that normally takes 10-14 days into a matter of hours while the patient is sedated.

"More addicts are prepared to do it because it cuts out the suffering of withdrawal. The usual procedures using methadone are very slow and painful," says Legarda. "The patients suffer a physical and emotional trauma because the nerve paths in the brain are thrown into chaos. The procedures also take time and 80 per cent of addicts give up before they have completed the treatment."

Legarda's treatment halts the neural chaos long enough for the body's endorphins, its natural painkillers, to take over. Narcotics and opiates interfere with the manufacture of endorphins. "It is important that the patient is sedated because it is only then that this neural chaos will stop and allow the neurotransmitters to assume their normal function and let the endorphins to do their work," he says.

Different medicines are administered in the four hour process to keep the patient sedated, to prevent diarrhea and vomiting and to neutralise the effect of the opiates. It takes nine hours for the patient to recover fully, after which they sleep the night and have psychological and physical tests before being discharged. The rapidity of the procedure and its medical intensity has drawn criticisms. At the addiction centre in London's Maudsley Hospital, doctors have considered introducing the treatment. "There are problems with it," said a spokesman. "It may detoxify the addict, but the issue is not getting people off drugs but getting them to stay off."

Legarda acknowledges that he was very concerned about the problem of regression at first. But all patients are offered weekly psychotherapy sessions and of the 450 he recently followed up, more than 70 per cent were off drugs six months later. "With standard withdrawal treatment, 30-40 per cent of patients give up in the first fortnight," he says. He has just completed a study of the results, which will be published in the American Journal of Psychiatry this year.

Therapist and doctors have been trying for years to reduce the period of withdrawal because fear of its consequences keeps addicts away from the clinics.

The treatment, available in three clinics in Spain, is only offered privately and costs around Pts 350,000 (\$2,800). But that may be a small price to pay for freedom from dependency. "Compared to what you spend on drugs it's not so much," says John, who is looking forward to returning to work next week. "I haven't felt so confident about the future for years."