

Four-hour drug "cure" Gives hope to addicts

A DRUG treatment that can help to "cure" addicts within four hours could soon be available in Britain.

The technique, developed in Spain, has shown a 100 per cent success rate on more than 100 heroin users. Drug specialists are considering setting up a similar programme in London.

Doctors believe the rapid detoxification procedure could be a major breakthrough in the treatment of multi-drug users and provide a cheap and powerful weapon against Britain's growing narcotics epidemic.

Addicts are made unconscious for four hours while they are given an intensive course of drugs to help weaned them off their dependency. At the end of the procedure they are completely detoxified.

The advantages of the system are: addicts do not suffer any withdrawal symptoms, it is cheaper than alternative methods and there is an extremely low drop-out rate.

Dr. Michael Gossop, head of research at the National Addiction Centre at the Maudsley Hospital in south London, said: "It's a radical hi-tech treatment that can rapidly finish out drug from someone's body. Because the system is instant it can also help cut waiting lists. We are looking at it

seriously for possible use within the next year, but there's likely to be a certain amount of resistance because it does not fit into any existing way of working".

Eleven male addicts were treated in the Spanish study at the end of 1992—all were addicted to heroin and eight also took other drugs. The addicts were asked not to take any drugs the night before going to the intensive-care unit at a hospital in Seville. During the morning the drug naltrexone was given to counter the effects of heroin. The subjects were then given an anaesthetic.

All the withdrawal symptoms were experienced in an intense burst while the patients were unconscious. They were constantly monitored and once they stopped showing symptoms they were revived. This took about four hours.

On discharge the following morning they were given further doses of naltrexone to be taken daily for at least three months.

More than 100 other heroin addicts have since been treated—all successfully. More centres are being set up in Spain, which is the only country known to be using the treatment.

If the technique is adopted in Britain, it could provide an invaluable tool

in countering the rise in drug misuse. The number of officially notified addicts in Britain rose by 13 per cent last year to 28,000. New addicts notification rose by 20 per cent to a record 11,600. These figures, however, are only a small proportion of the actual number of addicts.

Many existing detoxification methods take more than 10 days, are often expensive and suffer high drip-out rates. For techniques involving constant treatment in a hospital or clinic, 20 to 30 per cent leave before completion. In out-patient treatment this rate rises to 80 per cent. Withdrawal symptoms may persist for weeks.

In a discussion paper, Juan José Legarda, of the CITA drugs centre in Seville, and Dr. Gossop said: "An intriguing feature of the procedure is that the addicts is sedated during withdrawal... Many of the addicts in the trial expressed their enthusiasm for this aspect of the treatment".

They add that results so far had revealed no adverse physical or psychological effects.