

## STANDPOINT

Dr Jon Garvey questions the practice of private doctors who maintain regular drug supplies to addicts

# Prescribing abuse

It is fascinating how one's day-to-day experiences can throw the issues of the time into sharp relief.

The recent publication by Thomas Bewley and Hamid Ghodse, of a study heavily criticising private practitioners who prescribe for narcotics addicts has led to a rapid and outspoken response from Dr Ann Dally, president of the Association of Independent Doctors in Addiction.

She refutes the findings of the study that some private doctors are making an inordinate amount of money out of their practice, while helping to supply the black market with drugs surplus to the addicts' needs.

She goes on to argue the case for maintaining addicts on a stable quantity of drugs, so that they can lead normal, productive lives, and suggests the formation of an 'addicts' rights' group, analogous to the gay liberation movement, to show that 'it is not so terrible to be a heroin addict'.

I was visited by an addict, who claimed he was being treated privately in London by a doctor whose name is held in high regard.

At the time he registered with my partner, who takes a special interest in drug addiction, he had said that he was trying to get himself sorted out, having moved out of London to avoid temptation. My partner agreed to help, on the understanding that he came clean about his past convictions, treatment, and so on, and that my partner would make enquiries from the Home Office.

The Home Office reply revealed his story to be a tissue of lies from one end to the other, with numerous abuses of treatment centres, and several convictions for dealing in drugs.

Now he claimed to have lost his prescription — for Ritalin and Diconal — from the private doctor and could not afford to go down to London for some more. If he did not get anything from me, he would regretfully have to go back to stealing, and it would be my fault.

When I found there was no way of checking his story, as the doctor in question declines to have his telephone number in the medical directory, and told him that his previous dealings with us scarcely gave me reason to trust him, his shouted abuse all the way down the corridor made evening surgery that much more unpleasant for a dozen or so less demanding patients.

While I cannot claim that this man is typical of the many patients being treated by private doctors in the cities, he was certainly typical of the score or so who have used and abused our practice in the last year or two.

From my recent experience, I would call into question the amount of good done by the policy of maintenance dosage, adhered to by Dr Dally and her associates.

The patient I saw was ill-fed, ill-clothed, living in a squat used only by other addicts, and still so destitute that he could not afford the fare to London. He was still using large doses of two addictive drugs, and all this

after two years of 'treatment' by a doctor who collected a hefty fee for his services.

It may well be that my example is untypical of the type of person seen by people like Dr Dally. Perhaps thousands of addicts are leading stable lives, bringing up three or four children successfully.

It's just that the only addicts I have come across with children have given them a far from happy environment. One case comes to mind of the three-year-old left for several hours in a room with the body of an addict who had choked to death on his vomit, while his mother and father were too high to notice.

In contrast, I have come across addicts who truly did commit themselves to a stable lifestyle.

Dr Dally calls on doctors to treat addicts as human beings, but I question whether maintaining their habit is the best way of doing this, any more than if I simply prescribed VP sherry to my alcoholics and Marlboro to my nicotine inhalers, or left my anxious patients on Valium till the cows came home.

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○ See pages 18 and 21 on *Drug Addiction treatment*.