

# Kicking it in Beirut

Words Nadine Fares Kahil

**For every high there's a downside, but drug users in Lebanon are finding ways to beat the habit**

In this day and age, the drug addict is an increasingly common citizen. Since the second half of the last century, he or she has come to form a stronger stereotype in the minds of people, a stereotype that has only encouraged addicts to find it more difficult to rehabilitate their condition.

While some drug abusers do indeed succumb to stereotypical behaviors, mixing criminality and the basest of lifestyles, most are simply suffering from a tough combination of life's dismal challenges and peer pressure.

So then - how can our societies better help these individuals? Many drug abusers wish to be free of their ailment, for it is precisely that - an ailment which, through a mix of bad choices and severe circumstances, leaves the most strong-willed sufferer incapable of mending their ways. They need help - and in order to get that help they need the attitude of their surrounding society to change, particularly in our region, where thinking can be more tunnel-visioned than in other countries.

Drug abuse has an increasingly become a severe problem in Lebanon. One of the most potent mental conditions that will likely lead a person to drug abuse is depression. Some ten years ago, research carried out by Institute for Development, Research and Applied Care (IDRAC) showed that in Lebanon a quarter of the Lebanese population will have experienced depression by the age of 25, a statistic four times greater than that of the United States.

Oum Al Nour, a Lebanon-based clinic in Jounieh, admitted only 27 patients to their care in 1993. Now, however, the number exceeds 500 a year. What is not surprising, according to limited studies, is that the number of drug abusers is estimated to be between 10,000 and 15,000 - a figure that is continually on the rise. And almost half of the individuals are under the age of 19, with 70 per cent below the age of 24, according to the clinic's General Director, Mona Yazigee. "In the past, a lot of patients used to be over the age of 30. They were victims of war, members of political parties, or those who came from shattered homes," explains Yazigee. Nowadays, fewer than 15 per cent are over 30, suggesting that substance abuse has moved into the hands of the younger, and apparently just as depressed, generations.

A study undertaken by the IDRAC and the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC) on the populations of Lebanese high school and university students and other substance-abusers confirms this. It shows that the age of first-time drug users has considerably decreased in the last few years, from between 25 and 30 years of age at the beginning of the 90s, to as young as 15.

Yazigee adds that drugs in Lebanon are "very cheap - anyone can easily buy them". Users go for what is known as multiple-drugs - chemically created substances such as LSD and amphetamines added to heroin and even cough syrup. >



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In the past, there was a reluctance to educate ourselves about the dangers of drugs. Too often the subject was avoided, the thinking being that silence meant the problem didn't exist. But the escalation of drug use over the past 15 years has proven that this approach does not work. And we know that the Middle East is no exception.

It's true that countries in the region, including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon and the UAE, have been taking strong action – launching anti-drug campaigns, disseminating information through mass media, and using other sources of modern communication such as mass text messaging to mobile phones, catalogues and leaflets.

Nevertheless, the problem continues to exist and is on the rise. Nadia, a manager at Skoun, a Lebanese Addiction Centre, notes that people get hooked on drugs as a reaction to psychological, social, and/or family problems, as well as peer pressure and aspirations to become more westernised. "We live in a country where there is a tendency to copy the perceived trends in the West," says Nadia. "It's cool to smoke hash and it can all start this way. Of course, depression is also a crucial factor driving people towards drugs, though that's not to say it's the only one."

After studies on Lebanese youth, Skoun's studies suggest that what drives the country's youth to increasing depression is largely due to a lack of goals; there is a huge deficit of ambition and opportunities. Paul, a 25-year-old drug addict, says, "What should I do all day? I have a diploma in civil engineering and I can't find a job. I started smoking hash way back, but now moved onto something stronger. That's all I do all day. I get high, listen to music and try and do away with the feeling of being worthless in my own country."

Skoun invokes a pragmatic approach to the prevention and treatment of drug abuse; knowledge is the most essential key. As Lebanon's first out-patient drug centre, they offer patients the opportunity to live their lives normally while receiving treatment. "It's important in some cases as the patient will be

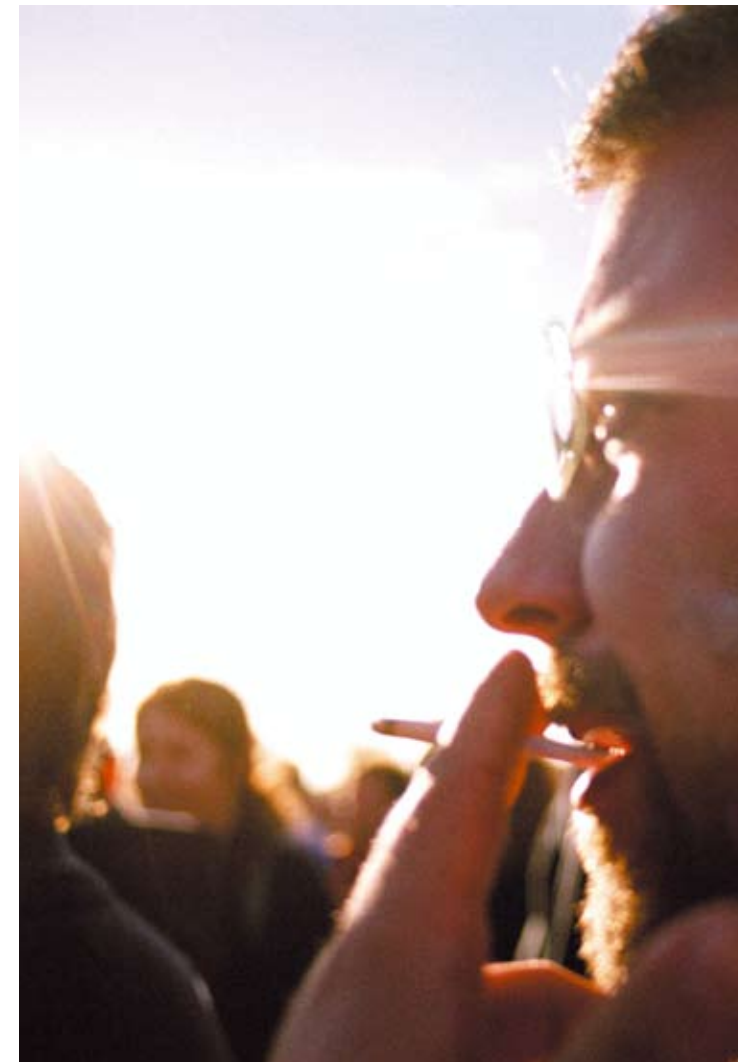
interactive with his or her society, while receiving counseling and treatment. This helps us better understand the core of the problem as well as help him or her get better while integrating a normal day to day life," members of the counseling team explain.

Accompanying their patients throughout the recovery process, Skoun's ultimate goal is to help drug abusers free themselves from addiction and live stable and productive lives. Since recovery needs vary from person to person, the multi-disciplinary team develops individualised holistic plans for each client – treating the whole person as well as the illness. Individuals receive the appropriate intervention required for a greater sense of direction, self-understanding and identity. The long-term goal of treatment is to enable the patient to achieve lasting abstinence, but the immediate aim is to reduce drug use, improve the patient's ability to function and minimise the medical and social complications of drug abuse.

One of Skoun's many programmes, Know More, Risk Less, was launched in 30 public secondary schools across Lebanon, its objective to educate and raise drug and drug abuse awareness amongst students in grades eight through ten. In each school, students are educated on the hazards and risks of taking drug and taught the skills that help just say no. Parents and teachers are also given a drug education and prevention seminar, which teaches them methods of discouraging children from substance abuse. The seminar also provides information on the drugs that Lebanese youth are being exposed to.

Each participant in the seminars – student, parent and teacher – receives a copy of the handbook "Drugs: Know More, Risk Less," an educational tool that gives Lebanese youth, parents, and educators access to sound and scientifically correct information on drugs, their effects and dangers, as well as drug laws in Lebanon.

"We can't solve the problem if we are constantly afraid. Drug addicts need help to overcome serious problems that they have not been able to overcome



or solve by themselves. These people are suffering from an illness. They are not criminals and come forward for help of their own free will," explain the counseling team at Skoun. "Not only does the person with the illness or problems that suffer, some have families and young children. There are also husbands or wives who when sober are good people, but when under the



### The UAE

Published statistics on narcotics seizures and domestic addiction reveal a growing drug problem among UAE and third-country nationals, which is notable given the country's harsh drug laws. A Ministry of Health report in late 1998 asserted that there were approximately 12,500 drug addicts in the country of 3.1 million people. The UAE is party to the 1988 UN Drug Convention.

Statistics on drug-related cases released by the UAE government (UAE) indicate that the majority of arrests for illegal trafficking occur in the northern Emirates. Factors that contribute to the regions drug problem are the emergence of Dubai and Sharjah as regional centres in the transportation of passengers and cargo, a porous land border with Oman, and the fact that a number of ports in the UAE are de facto "free ports". Transshipped cargo is not subject to inspection, as are other goods that enter the country.

To mark the occasion of International Anti-Narcotics Day on June 26, the UAE released a report outlining the drug problem in the UAE. The report noted that the majority of UAE drug users take their first dose abroad, primarily because of peer pressure. Statistics reveal that 75 per cent of drug users in the UAE prefer hashish, 13 per cent use heroin, while six per cent use morphine.

The report illustrates a clear relationship between drug abuse and level of education: 75 per cent of arrested drug users in 2002 were high school graduates, but only two per cent were university graduates. Police arrested 272 suspects in 178 drug-related cases in 2005 and 319 persons were subjected to tests.

More than 250 persons were arrested in 172 cases in 2006 in the anti-narcotic department of Abu Dhabi police. To address the problem, the government established rehab centres in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Ajman and Sharjah for those identified as addicts. Its purpose is to reduce demand through public awareness campaigns directed at young people in addition to the establishment of rehabilitation centres.

influence of drugs lose control, beat their partners and hurt their children whom they deeply love. They feel the guilt when they are sober... Most people can cope just fine and responsibly with what life throws at them, but there are others who cannot cope without the artificial comfort of drugs. They should not be penalised, but helped." ●