

Albuquerque, New Mexico
April, 1972.

Although I have many chapters coming up later on drugs, let me anticipate one since I am getting so many inquiries.

No one could have been happier than I when it was announced that a cure for heroin addiction had been found. Although I'm often accused of being "soft" on drugs, this is anything but true. You cannot lose as many friends as I have to overdose and encourage people to use drugs. When the panacea Methadone was discovered, I naturally hoped it was to be a cure-all since at that time I knew of no cure practically speaking of addiction. (I still don't). I am sure you have all heard the good things which can be said of it - the addict is freed to live a normal life much as the diabetic who shoots insulin, it is inexpensive, it reduces crime, helps reduce withdrawal pains (a much overrated phenomenon of police drug education scare programs. All of us have watched 10 bag a day addicts withdraw cold turkey without so much as a headache), does not produce the euphoria of heroin, diminishes the craving, frees the addict for psychological treatment, allows him to work and deal with his emotions instead of running from them.

My first hesitation about the drug came when Mayors all over the country (and even the Nixon Administration) began to inaugurate Methadone Clinics. Any "establishment" solution is naturally suspect. If smoking dope is so bad because it is a drug, then how justify giving drugs? Perhaps you have heard my prediction that heroin will be legalized before pot (to registered addicts) for the same reason - not because it is moral or good but economical. For a few bucks a week we can shoot you up with Methadone (or heroin) and you'll stop stealing hundreds of dollars a day from us. (Heroin costs little to make - it is the black market that makes it expensive). Was this to be another instance where property was more important than life? Destroy an individual to protect private property? Shoot to kill looters?

My second criticism was the naivete displayed in dispensing Methadone. We pleaded with the Mayor's office in Boston to require on the spot urine specimens (to be sure the addict wasn't chipping i.e. doing both drugs) and on site consumption (lest he go out and sell it). That was several years ago. But authorities would not listen, thought addicts would be so grateful as not to abuse the program (addicts are amoral people. I've seen them shoot up their own little brothers and sisters. I know of a mother who put the first needle in her 14 year old son's arm in order to make him a male prostitute to support her habit). The result was a circus at Whittier Street Clinic. From every surrounding State came hundreds of non-addicted people claiming heroin addiction, addicts proving they were clean with a bottle of urine acquired from a local wino for a pint, shooting up in the toilets, selling "scripts" in the corridors, selling Methadone on the street.

"They would not listen, they did not know how, perhaps they'll listen now" goes a new song. Everywhere I go in the country, I find kids addicted to Methadone first given to them by a Mayor's Methadone Clinic. I heard recently that the Mayor's man on drugs, under fire, agreed soon to correct these abuses. All these years it took? He promised that years ago. It is too late for so many. Those simplistic rednecks so angry with pushers and dealers, desirous of death penalties and hangings, etc. might consider beginning with the Mayor.

This is one area in which I agreed with ex-addicts and medical men who were in general hostile to Methadone programs. Dr. Myerson while at Mattapan State was an advocate who admittedly "handed it out like water" (Worcester Gazette June 5, 1970) but is against it now. "What you are really saying to a guy is 'we will give you Methadone so you won't steal from us to buy heroin'. It is like giving a baby a pacifier so you won't have to be disturbed by his crying." (Ibid)

It is interesting to note the history of Methadone. First there was pain and suffering and medicine discovered a magnificent pain reliever - opium. But it was learned that it was addictive. We roamed around and found a drug to "cure" it - morphine. Only to learn that it was more addictive. So we sought and found after the Spanish American War and World War I a panacea, a cure-all, a wonder drug - heroin. (In 1923 the United States was giving morphine and heroin to addicts). Quickly we discovered it was worse than the drug addiction it was to cure. The search was on again. Hooray we have a cure. But it is more addictive - it's name? - Methadone. No drug can get you off it. "They are not listening still; perhaps they never will."

There are two types of Methadone treatments:

Reduction - declining doses used to prevent the withdrawal symptoms associated with heroin. It helps clean him up physically and prepares him for therapy. It cures nothing. I really have no quarrel with this type of use, in conjunction with therapy.

Maintenance - large doses over long periods which lead to addiction to one drug instead of another. This is the controverted program.

These animadversions are not new. If you haven't heard me voice them it is because I stopped fighting this battle years ago. Why? I never had the luxury of doing "good" things. Rather I could choose between evils. If I was to get a hostel from the politicians, I couldn't afford to be too vociferous in condemning their programs. Compromise? Cowardice? What think you?

I don't claim Methadone is unworkable - I say it is premature (1) to use it so extensively without enough scientific evidence, (2) to use it indiscriminately. Columbia University Research team called it a "beacon of hope" but for certain types and ages. It is one thing to say to a 60 year old "you've tried every other type of program unsuccessfully. At least with Methadone you will be able to lead a decent life.". It is another thing to say to a 16 year old boy: "You are hopeless. We will addict you to a drug for which there is no cure and for the rest of your life you will have to get your daily fix." (3) To use it without safeguards - on the spot urins specimens and consumption, (4) to use it and speak about it as if it were a cure-all. The aura of magic surrounding Methadone claims does a disservice to kids wrestling with the temptation to shoot scag, mistakenly convincing them that if they ever should get the monkey on their backs there is a simple cure. There isn't. For most addicts will never enter, graduate from and stay clean after any program I know of.

In other words, proceed with caution - not with the unscientific, immoral, indiscriminate abandon which has characterized so many of these programs.

Father Paul