

Opium use and dependence in hill tribe villages in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

Opium addiction is a wide-spread and serious problem among the hill tribes of Thailand. Central to the problem is the Karen, partly due to the large number of population and hence large number of addicts and partly due to the complexity of the problem. Being the largest tribe, almost half of the addicts treated at the Narcotic Treatment Center for Hill Tribes were Karen. The severe poverty among the Karen led to poor environment, nutrition and health as well as to the socio-economic stress, anxiety and social indifference. The mild attitude towards tobacco and opium coupled with the free availability of the drugs in the society have led to high rate of addiction which in turn compounded the poverty. The intertribal social and economic set-up perpetuates this vicious cycle. The treatment of opium addicts concentrating on detoxification alone is associated with high degree of failure. Social and economic reform is required in tackling the problem of opium addiction among the Karen. On the other hand, the Hmong which are one of the main opium producers, also have opium addiction problem. The main causes of their addiction are physical illnesses especially chronic and incurable diseases as well as poor general health and overwork. Provision of a comprehensive health care should include promotive, preventive and curative measures. Health education would be the most important long term effort in order to improve the general health and induce proper attitude. In the meantime some addicts with good motivation will be benefited by a management programme. Between these two extremes, there are many intermediate situations which are present among the different tribes.

Key words : Hill tribe, Opium, Drug addicts, Karen, Hmong