

Dangerous Addictions

Drug problem on campus is more widespread than many believe

By KEVIN BURNS
THE BATTALION

In spite of Texas A&M's reputation as a predominately conservative university, it cannot escape a problem that exists on virtually every college campus: drug abuse.

John, whose name has been changed for anonymity, is a former drug user and a current A&M student. He smoked marijuana for the first time when he was 16. John said drug use became a part of his life at a very young age and escalated rapidly into a full-fledged addiction.

"The next drug that I tried was actually alcohol," John said. "Then I went to GHB, or gamma-hydroxybutyrate."

Progressing to the next level, he began to peddle and make his own GHB.

"I went ahead and started making [GHB] and taking it and selling it," John said. "That was a pretty big leap, I guess, from smoking weed a little bit and drinking, to actually selling and producing drugs."

John said he first learned about GHB from his brother and decided to try it. His addiction followed him to college and he frequently experimented with other drugs, including ecstasy and LSD. However, he said the ease and accessibility combined with euphoric effects made GHB especially appealing.

"It was incredible, kind of like a euphoric feeling, but I was still very alert and felt that I was in complete control," John said. "I was just very happy. I was short at the time and I heard it was a growth hormone — it was like the dream drug for me."

Since considering the financial and mental detriments of drug abuse, John said he decided to stop taking drugs and has been drug-free for several months.

"Drugs are expensive and they do damage your brain," John said. "I've seen plenty of older people who excessively use drugs and aren't quite mentally there — they just aren't as alert as one should be."

Also, John said he believes the disease of addiction is a harsh reality that happens to many people.

"I didn't want to fall victim to [addiction]," John said. "I figured it was good preventative maintenance just to stop doing [drugs] completely and not put myself at risk. I've got better things to do with my time, things that are more productive."

While this is just one story of a drug reality that continues to grow at A&M, Dr. Dennis Reardon, a licensed drug therapist with the Department of Student Life, said the problem is more widespread than one might think.

"[Although] there is less drug use here ... than you would expect

at a school this size and age population, I am seeing more people that are using drugs other than alcohol," Reardon said.

Reardon's work has been to help people stay off of drugs and feels the best method is abstinence.

"If they're using drugs, they're really making a mistake," Reardon said. "I would recommend, even if they're using marijuana and even alcohol to an excess, they should talk to somebody about their use. [Habitual usage] can eventually grow to a problem for almost anybody. Harder drugs are more difficult to deal with. Plus, it puts you close to criminal activity."

Reardon said another reason people should not use drugs is because there is no way to trust them as products.

"The people that are making the harder drugs and selling them [are] criminals," he said. "They really don't care what happens to you as long as you give them money."

Reardon also points out that dealers may use false advertising in selling to potential buyers.

"Let's say they try to sell you ecstasy. How do you know it's ecstasy? It could be anything. They cut it with anything they've got

to make it go further, and some of it is hazardous materials like strychnine," he said.

For Reardon, the bottom line is the issue of legality.

"There are no legitimate sources for illegitimate drugs," he said. "Many people believe ecstasy, or MDMA is harmless and has few side effects, but Reardon said the actual damage incurred by the user proves that is not the case."

"[Drug abuse] is harmful and changes the structure of the brain cell itself at the most important level," Reardon said. "[Ecstasy] distorts the structure and the connection between neurons and axons. In other words, things that made sense before will no longer make sense. Another side effect is one's body overheating to the point of a heat-stroke, possibly to the point of death."

Sara, who also wishes to remain anonymous, said her drug life began during her freshman year at A&M. She said she feels it is unfair that cigarettes and alcohol are legal while marijuana is not, and said she has no plans of ending her once-to-twice-a-month habit despite its illegality.

"Obviously it is a crime because it's against the law, but I think it's healthier than drinking a lot of alcohol and getting drunk — physically and mentally," Sara said. "Alcohol will get you drunk, cigarettes will get you buzzed and marijuana will too — so they are all in the same genre, as far as what they do to you. I don't understand the legal rationale."

Sara also said she agrees that usage will affect one's ability to function on the job or in everyday circumstances.

"I had a good friend my freshman year — a completely average guy, doing good in classes, etc. Now he is the biggest druggie I know," Sara said. "His grades have completely dropped, and he's out of the business school. He smokes a lot, [and] it's obviously affecting him."

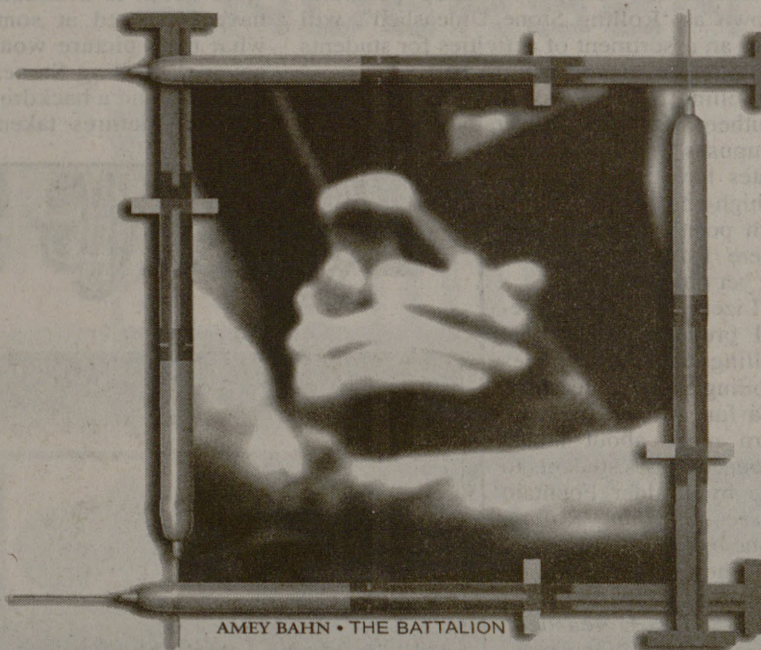
In spite of witnessing the toll drugs can take on another's life, Sara said she sees a distinction based on character and personal maturity between a casual user and "druggie."

"I think it takes mature people to determine what is over the top and too much," she said. "It's the same with alcohol, it can affect you, and you'll become an alcoholic. You have to know when too much is too much."

Regardless of the justification that marijuana is controllable with self-restraint and conservative usage, Reardon said this view is a widely-held misconception.

"Contrary to popular belief, people can get physiologically and psychologically addicted to marijuana," Reardon said.

Yet for many drug abusers, this truth is realized too late.



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