

The Vancouver Sun

Op/Ed

☆ Saturday, Sept. 12, 1992

DRUGS

For all the years, money and effort spent on prohibition, what have we gained?

A war that can't be won

AS THE FEW people who care will have noticed, heroin addicts have been dying of drug overdoses in this province. They bought what they thought was the old standard strength of three to six per cent and got 12 to 15 per cent instead.

The report of the overdose deaths of 124 people in 1991 (which got equal space in *The Sun* with a story about people illegally feeding popcorn to pigeons) was important not for what it said but for the question it raised.



ST. PIERRE

We have been throwing good Canadian tax dollars at the heroin trade since Mackenzie King was a kid. Costs in the criminal justice system alone are atrocious. In one current Vancouver case, 1,000 court days have been spent in expensive legal exercises before a single witness has been called.

For all the years and treasure spent on heroin prohibition, what have we gained? The stuff is now so plentiful that sellers are effectively cutting prices. It's time we listened to what the marketplace is telling us. It says nothing about the narcotics supply being choked off by the much-publicized 10, 20 and 50-million-dollar seizures. It testifies to the contrary. Heroin prices drop because of oversupply. There is an oversupply because the Canadian government, like the American government and all the other governments, cannot prevent importation or sale.

If governments could make prohibition work, it wouldn't matter that production has increased 21 per cent in Southeast Asia, 27 per cent in Southwest Asia and by who knows how much in the state of Sinaloa in Mexico.

People in this country want to buy the stuff. They also want to buy cocaine, opium, LSD, tea, marijuana, coffee, alcohol and angel dust.

What they want, they will get. If they can't buy legally, they will buy illegally. If they must buy illegally, then criminal empires will be set up to serve them and to scare the rest of us.

We were supposed to have learned that lesson by our great, foolish experiment in prohibiting alcohol. Clearly, we didn't get the message.

It is unpopular to equate tea, coffee, khat and marijuana, all admittedly mild forms of drugs, to the freebase form of cocaine called crack which apparently leads to appalling outbursts of violence in some individuals.



KERRY WAGHORN



PROHIBITION made them wealthy men: Pablo Escobar, above, Al Capone, left

However, there was a time when all such drugs, the good, the bad and the ugly, were classified together. All were legal.

Until 1913, all drugs were available for pennies to people on this continent. Lachrymose Victorian wives who depended upon some patent medicines became addicts. One of the world's most popular soft drinks, Coca-Cola, was originally laced with cocaine and was addictive.

Sad, perhaps, but we all got along somehow.

Then we tried prohibition, and every time it proves unworkable we try harder.

Alcohol prohibition created gangsters like Al Capone. But he and his fellows were hubcap stealers compared with the criminal empires we have created today with narcotics prohibition programs.

Again, look to the marketplace.

tions a couple of years ago, the estimated street value so large as to be eminently forgettable. They thought it represented a three-month supply to the tens of millions of American users. There wasn't even a blip in the street prices, which have been in general decline for years.

Not only the marketplace tells the truth. So do a few officials.

Hear Col. Ralph Milstead, former director of public safety for the State of Arizona, testifying to a U.S. congressional committee on narcotics in 1986:

"It is not a matter of a few holes in the dike which can be plugged by additional manpower. The dike is gone.

"We will hear people say, 'Well, the problem is Mexico, the problem is Bolivia, the problem is Afghanistan, it is Colombia . . .'

"The problem is in the hearts and minds of the American people who desire this flight from reality, this escape."

Men like Col. Milstead will not make themselves heard until enough ordinary citizens begin asking themselves why their wives and friends should be shot down in Safeway parking lots because of wars between drug empires about which they neither know nor care. It will also occur to them when they have been robbed often enough by addicts who desperately need money for a fix. Illegal drug prices may drop, but not to levels addicts can afford.

Sooner or later, the sooner the better, we will make all drugs legal for sale, cheaply, across the counter at the friendly neighborhood pharmacy, just as they were 100 years ago.

You will no longer pay the towering bills totted up in the police, the customs and the general justice system. Drug lords will no longer pervert police, governments or courts, for the good reason that it will no longer profit them to do so.

Of course no one should dispute that many horrors will result from legalized narcotics such as cocaine and angel dust, just as many horrors still result from legalized alcohol.

The difference will be that a cheap drug policy will not support crime empires or expensive criminal lawyers.

Given more social conscience and common sense than is usual, governments might even divert some of the money they now spend in futile policing to weaning a few addicts of dangerous drugs from their poison.

As for those beyond rescue, so be it. Go with God, who has more patience with you than the rest of us do.

The rest of us should recognize that prohibition of general narcotics has been every bit as much a failure as the prohibition of the specific narcotic alcohol, and it has proved even more damaging to society. Trying to kill a snake tail first is danger-

Fortune magazine lists Pablo Escobar as one of the world's wealthiest men. He heads a drug smuggling ring. He is a fugitive at the moment but he will no more cease directing drug shipments out of Colombia than Al Capone ceased directing alcohol shipments while imprisoned in Illinois.

A Mexican policeman, honest to the best of my knowledge, pointed out to me one day that drug lords in our section of Mexico are much wealthier, much stronger, than any municipal governments or some departments of state government. Further, the Mexican people know it. Most people know where the eagle sits.

The Mexicans have jailed some and shot others but it would be absurd to suggest that no new crime kings have taken over their operations. Where there is illegal profit there will be criminal men.

Decades ago, when most of us were less neurotic and didn't need our minds twisted, drug law enforcement may have had some effect. When there was a large heroin or opium seizure, the street price would usually rise for a while until new supplies arrived.