

**EASING
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TURKEY
TRAUMAS**

(By Yang Jianxiang)

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Authorities in southwest China's Yunnan, a province bordering Burma and the Golden Triangle, which is notorious for drug trafficking and abuse, are fighting a heroin war. In their weaponry is a herbal capsule that lessens the agony of addicts' withdrawal, making their escape from the hopeless cycle of drug abuse less hell-like than ever before.

Wang LAN used to be a respectable bank accountant, but her career fell apart, as did her life, under the addiction of drugs. Since her early twenties she has been trapped in a cycle of drug dependency despite being treated in clinics on six occasions.

The woman lives in Kunming, the provincial capital of Yunnan. But with drug addiction wrecking her hopeful, young life, she really doesn't "live" any more. She just exists between fixes.

And what's even sadder is that addicts just like Wang LAN are not rarities in Kunming. The southwestern Chinese city is a black spot for drug addiction and the Public Security Bureau (Chinese police) there knows it. They are fighting on the front line in the country's drug war.

But while they may well use arms to combat the traffickers, they have a new medicine to help the addicts. It's called 626, after that day in June 1996 designated by the United Nations to promote awareness on the evils of drug addiction.

Wang is now a patient at the Kunming Compulsory Treatment Center for Drug Addicts. She's off heroin and on 626. It is helping her to really live again.

"Of all the medicines I've tried, the 626 capsule is the best," she says. "It's not as hard to take as many other medicines, and it doesn't make you suffer." Many of the center's other 600 compulsory and 100 voluntary patients agree.

Hell

One of the nightmares of trying to escape from drug addiction is excruciating physical and mental torment caused by withdrawal. The trauma can drive some addicts to simply an acceptance that they will be addicts forever. Others regard suicide as the only way out.

Wang says withdrawal feels like "having pains all over the body;

Bones itching from inside as though ants are creeping within — you don't know where to scratch, and you wish you could have your arms and legs cut off."

She says that after taking 626 capsules such symptoms are less traumatic and subside after several days. The capsule is a herbal proprietary medicine developed by the Kunming center, which is now administered by Kunming's Public Security Bureau.

A study of 1,000 addicts treated at the center with the medication shows that the capsule brings measurable relief between just five and 20 minutes after initial administration. Five to seven days of further treatment had patients in the study reporting "freedom from physical torture." Two to seven days' more treatment saw many more signs of successful withdrawal being brought about. The overall efficacy rate of the 626 capsules is 98.9 percent.

While providing rapid relief from suffering, the capsule induces none of the side effects, which are commonly experienced by the taking of conventional medicines. Chronic lethargy, causing patients to sleep day and night, coupled with extreme weakness in the limbs, are common side effects. Another is memory loss. But perhaps the worst thing is that addicts become dependent on the

medications which themselves are actually designed to assist in withdrawal.

An example is methadone, a chemical compound widely used by withdrawing addicts for its strong pain-killing property. While it is largely successful in gradually reducing dependence on drugs, it can in itself become indispensable to a patient. Many former heroin addicts are currently methadone addicts.

Doses of the 626 are gradually reduced during a course of treatment, which normally takes 12 days. On the first day, a patient is given three doses, each of eight capsules. Dosage is gradually reduced over the next 11 days, with only three capsules being administered on the final three days. Thus a total of 126 capsules is usually enough to treat an addict. Some patients are free of physical addiction after only eight days.

The capsule costs one-third of the price of methadone, according to a research report produced by the center.

"In addition, most patients lead a fairly normal life while taking 626," says Pan Changzhong, deputy director and physician-in-charge. He was a leading researcher in the task force, which prepared the capsules.

Shen Jie, chief of the center's medical section and another leading member of the research group, says the formulation of 626 capsules is based on the principles of traditional Chinese medicine in terms of tranquilizing and calming the mind and clearing away hot and toxic substances.

Abstinence Syndrome

Through close study of the abstinence syndrome, also known as withdrawal syndrome, which is related to conventional anti-addiction medicines, Shen and his colleagues found that once the medicine on which a patient was dependent was withdrawn, active levels of body substances, such as enkephalins, dwindled dramatically. This led to both increases and decreases in the secretion of the body's series of neuro-transmitters. It is at this point that patients suffer the extreme neural, mental and digestive disorders associated with the traumas of withdrawal, often called cold turkey.

The 626 capsule comprises more than 20 medicinal herbs, including *Xueleng* (scarlet vine), *Xiaoheiyao* (small black medicine), and *Sanwu* (three blacks). Shen says about 80 percent of the herbs are indigenous and unique to Yunnan, and that quite a few of them are not even recorded in standard herbal catalogs.

Herbs in 626 activate the body's opiate receptors and serve to purge pathogenic factors, check the upward adverse flow of refined nutritive substances in internal organs, calm the mind and reinforce the functions of the spleen and stomach.

Ingredients also comprise tiny amounts of crude opium and morphine, with a combined total of no more than 5.6 milligrams per gram, Shen says. He emphasizes that such amounts cannot cause dependence, as can methadone and some opiate tinctures used in substitution therapy. Observation of more than 10,000 users of the 626 has revealed no cases of dependence development.

Drug abuse once again reared its ugly head in Yunnan during the 1980s when China's reform policy opened land border crossings between the province and its southwestern neighbors of Burma, Laos and Vietnam. Straggling the notorious Golden Triangle, Southeast Asia's main center of drug production, has made Yunnan a front door to China for smugglers. They dodge detection at customs checkpoints or avoid them altogether by transporting their contraband along remote mountain and jungle tracks.

Yunnan led all Chinese provinces in the major campaign against drugs in the late 1980s, and the Kunming center was established in August 1989 — the first of its kind in the country.

In those early days, Pan recalls, the staff were by the lack of a suitable medication to give addicts relief from withdrawal. They tried the many internationally- and domestically-used therapies and medicines, only to find them either ineffective, or effective but too costly.

He says: "As none of the established medicines were deemed desirable, we decided to develop an effective prescription based on traditional Chinese medicine, taking advantage of the rich plant resources of Yunnan. The province is known as a natural botanical kingdom."

The quest was launched in February 1991. Pan, Shen and Zhang Zhidao, a doctor invited from the Chuxiong Hospital of Traditional Chinese Medicine, and colleagues studied numerous addiction-relieving formulas, either recorded in ancient medical books or handed down as folk prescriptions. "We even found the prescription used by Lin Zexu to cure opium addicts about 155 years ago," says Shen.

In 1839, Lin Zexu, in his capacity as Imperial Commissioner of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), ordered the burning of some 20,000 cases of smuggled opium confiscated from the British East-India Company, on Humen beach in Guangdong Province. This action was probably the earliest public demonstration of China's determination to stop illegal trafficking and stem drug abuse.

Members of the Kunming research group regard themselves as successors to Lin Zexu in the campaign against drugs by developing the most effective addiction-relieving medicine to date. Having been tried in numerous compositions and subjected to thousands of clinical tests, the formula for the 626 capsule was finally settled upon in 1994.

An appraisal panel of 11 experts representing the province's top medical and pharmaceutical authorities reviewed the capsule's performance at the end of 1994. They unanimously agreed that it was an effective, addiction-breaking medication, and that its composition was well founded, rigorously developed and, in the vast majority of cases, capable of producing desirable results. The panel predicted that the new product would play an important role in the global fight against drug abuse.

Experiments

In 1995, a group of scientists led by Professor Jiang Jiaxiong, a well-known pharmacologist of the Kunming Medical College, conducted a series of experiments on the effects of the 626 at the Yunnan Key Laboratory on Pharmacology and Toxicology of Natural Drugs.

One of the experiments compared the performances of the 626 capsule with methadone — the latter considered by many as the most effective cure for drug addicts — on different groups of heroin-dependent monkeys. The results showed the capsule had a remarkable withdrawal-easing effect comparable to that of methadone.

A very small proportion of users may feel thirsty or suffer from insomnia. These manifestations, however, cannot be compared with the physical torment resulting from taking other medicines, says Shen, who emphasizes that difficulty in sleeping is not a side effect of the 626 capsule. "Heroin is the real culprit because insomnia is part of the abstinence syndrome," he says. "The fact that some users still have sleeping problems indicates that the capsule has not yet taken full effect on those drug addicts. Some users feel sleepy. This is the very effect we expect of the capsule."

The doctor concedes that the 626 has "minimal" side effects. "We have used it in 10,000 cases

now, and have observed no instances of danger in any form."

Home Therapy

Addicts can take the 626 capsules at home, but Shen warns that correct dosages must be strictly followed. He advises patients to take the capsules under supervision from family members.

A package of 120 capsules, enough for a 10-day course of treatment, costs 500 yuan (US\$60) — about one-third of the cost of methadone.

The 626 capsule is targeted mainly at heroin addicts, the most commonly used drug in Yunnan. But it has also been given to a limited number of opium, cocaine and marijuana addicts, with similarly impressive results.

So far the 626 capsule has mainly been used in drug addiction treatment centers attached to public security bureau throughout Yunnan. Its production, controlled by the Kunming center, is in batches of 10,000 packages manufactured on a sporadic basis.

The center was given the go-ahead by the provincial Public Health Department and the Pharmaceutical Administration to establish its own Kunming Kangqi Pharmaceutical Plant, which went into operation in early 1997.

The plant is located within the center's walled compound. With an investment of 1.2 million yuan (US\$150,000), it is equipped with modern pharmaceutical manufacturing facilities. First-year production totaled 30,000 small packages. "This is adequate to meet the demand in Yunnan Province," says center director Zhang Yuzu.

"We're now applying for authorization by the Ministry of Public Health so that we can expand our production to meet national or even international demand, so that more drug addicts can benefit from this Chinese prescription."

According to the latest statistics, there are 500 drug-addiction treatment centers across China. As the oldest and largest, the Kunming center enjoys a reputation for its effective treatments. It now combines rehabilitation, education, scientific research and 626 production as well as the medical treatment of drug addiction. Since its establishment, it has successfully helped more than 12,000 addicts back to normal life.

The center is often on the itinerary of government officials, drug-fighting experts and scholars visiting the province. Many delegates, from more than 80 countries, spoke highly of the work they saw, some of them dubbing the facility "the world's No. 1 drug treatment center."

The 626 capsule has obviously been central to the center's noteworthy success and gaining of worldwide regard. Quite a few overseas visitors have proposed cooperation with the center on the further development of this capsule and other potential cures. In March 1996, four senior officials from the center and the city's Public Security Bureau were invited to tour the United States. There, the Chinese delegation signed a letter of intent with the Drug Study Center of Miami University. The US side agreed to fund a series of studies to be made at the Kunming center and to arrange for clinical trials of the 626 at the "Safe Port" Drug Addiction Treatment Center in Key West, Florida.

Regarding future stages of the capsule's development, Pan says researchers will focus their attention in two areas: further purification, thus enabling lower effective dosages to be made, and to make the prescription a cure for psychological as well as physical addiction.

Relapse Problem

This dual approach, he says, stems from recognition that the relapse rate of addicts who have kicked their habit is still very high. A 1995 post-cure survey reveals that the relapse rate of addicts treated at the Kunming center was as high as 75 percent.

Pan says: "Relapses are obviously no good to patients, and they are minuses for our efforts."

There are various reasons for relapse, many of them beyond the control of treatment centers, which calls for efforts from society.

For instance, patients lead a full life inside the center and cannot find drugs there, recalls Miss Cao, a former taxi driver.

"You don't miss the drugs at the center," she says. "But once you are out and have nothing to do, you naturally meet up with the drug addicts you once knew — then you are in danger of becoming hooked again."

While it is hard for the treatment center to check such negative associations. Pan says, "we must try to leave withdrawn patients with some kind of a drug-resistance effect so that they feel sick whenever they think of using drugs — only then will there be a chance of effecting a large number of permanent cures."

When that dream is realized, drug abuse will be eradicated. But in the meantime 626 gives addicts a chance to kick their habits. The rest is up to society. They must be accepted as recovered patients and be provided with social and family support to rebuild their shattered lives.

Mr. Duan Wenlong
Kunming Public Security Bureau
525 Beijing Road
Kunming, 650031
Yunnan Province
P.R. China
Tel (86-871) 3163309
Fax (86-871) 3161021 Ext.2444