

The Northern Echo
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COMMENT

Commnt 300 words hdpn

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What do you think?
echo@nne.co.uk

Write to: The Editor, Hear All Sides,
The Northern Echo, PO Box 14, Priestgate,
Darlington, DL1 1NF.

Fax: 01325-360754

email: echo@nne.co.uk

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If you have any comments or suggestions about the print quality of today's copy of **The Northern Echo**, please contact our customer care department on 01325-505151.

No gains from taking drugs

THE struggles of addiction have hit the headlines again following the sad death of Carrie Fisher. The actress, who shot to fame aged 19, playing Princess Leia in the *Star Wars* series, was candid about her life-long battles with drug addiction and mental illness. Her first experience of recreational drugs was as a 13-year-old when she was presented with a bag of marijuana by her mother and she went on to write a fictionalised account of her travails in the best-selling novel *Postcards from the Edge*.

There is a strong lobby for legalising some recreational drugs, most notably marijuana, under the guise of the purported medical benefits as well as arguments that legalisation will result in greater regulation and user safety, in the same way that alcohol and tobacco are controlled.

A literal A to Z of recreational drugs exists, ranging from tablets and substances which are inhaled or smoked, through to preparations which can be injected into the bloodstream.

Many reasons have been cited for why individuals experiment with recreational drug use, including peer pressure, rebelliousness, as an aid to relaxation, and indeed the belief that such substances will expand your mind and somehow provide a more enlightened outlook on life. However, in the same way that there is no evidence to suggest any benefit from consuming alcohol if you are teetotal, there are no physical or mental health gains whatsoever from recreational drug use. Just as the answer to one's problems is never at the bottom of a glass, nor will it be at the end of a needle.

And although certain aspects of society and the media have chosen to glamourise drug use, the reality is anything but. The most commonly used recreational drug in the UK is marijuana, also known as cannabis, a leaf which is either smoked on its own or mixed with tobacco. It has been incorrectly portrayed as a fairly innocuous, harmless drug which helps to make you feel relaxed and happy by altering the way you view stressful events, making them seem less worrisome. In actual fact it is more likely to impair your ability think straight and carry out simple everyday tasks such as driving, resulting in possible harm to the user as well as others. Repeated use is linked with serious consequences including schizophrenia and dementia. These may occur long after the person has discarded the habit.

Cocaine, known colloquially as coke, will be forever linked with the excess of the 1980s, with multiple films of the time depicting well-heeled executives snorting the white powder, often with the aid of £20 or £50 notes. Carrie Fisher once claimed that she had taken cocaine during the filming of *The Empire Strikes Back*, but said later: "I didn't even like coke that much. It was just a case of getting on whatever train I needed to take to get high."

Alleged benefits include feelings of eu-



ADDICTION: Cocaine can promote feelings of euphoria but can also bring on massive physical and mental lows
Picture: STEVE PARSONS/PA Wire



Is there a case for legalising some recreational drugs – or are the dangers too great? **Dr Zak Uddin**, a GP, sifts through the evidence

phoria and invincibility, with the need for less sleep. The reality however, is a high followed by what may be a massive low mentally and physically. Cocaine affects the heart and blood vessels, causing irregular heart rhythms which affect the organ's ability to pump blood to the rest of the body. It is one of the leading causes of heart attack in the under thirty age group. A proportion of these heart attacks will be fatal.

Carrie Fisher once famously joked: "You know how they say that religion is the opiate of the masses? Well I took masses of opiates religiously." But addiction is no laughing matter.

Apart from the physical and mental side effects of drug use, these substances affect society as a whole, destroying the lives of those who use them, their loved ones and often completely unrelated individuals. A sustained habit is expensive and individuals may turn to crime to fund it. Persons in regular jobs may lose their employment due to the mental impairment that such drugs

actually cause. Drug users are more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviour, for example driving under the influence. Behavioural alterations, including irritability and sudden outbursts during the come-down period, and the substance of addiction becoming the centre of that person's world, ruin relationships and families.

Despite all this, we now have a better understanding of the common symptoms and signs of addiction, greater resources for helping victim of drug addiction, as well as reduced social stigma attached to seeking help. The signs of drug use are many and varied, and although a change in behaviour is the most common, it would be wrong to say that all persons with this are drug users. Often there are multiple but subtle signs that alert concern.

If you are worried that a loved one may be taking recreational drugs, it may help to talk with them privately in a non-confrontational matter. They may be under a lot of stress and a friendly face is what they need. Your regular GP will also be an excellent source of support and information. Some may be able to manage drug addiction themselves, and all will be able to direct you towards the appropriate help.

GOOD WEBSITES

www.adfam.org.uk
www.talktofrank.com
www.supportline.org.uk

Dr Zak Uddin

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