

The rocky road – crack in Brazil

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Some cities in Brazil are in the throes of a crack epidemic, particularly large urban centres like São Paulo. From a research point of view, remarkably little is known about crack users in Brazil (Nappo *et al.*, 1994; Dunn *et al.*, 1996). Their demographic characteristics, patterns of use and long-term outcome are unknown – the subject of anecdote and conjecture but few facts. One of the most fascinating and recent studies to be published on this subject comes not from a psychiatrist, but a telejournalist – Marco Antonio Uchôa (1996). His investigation covers the full cast of characters involved in the crack problem: leaders of drug cartels, drug dealers, those who ‘cook-up’ crack in their kitchens, users, desperate parents, the police and psychiatrists. Uchôa traces the history and progress of the drug in Brazil and illustrates the story with vignettes of those involved. The research is an extraordinary piece of work that at times seems to have been extremely dangerous to undertake – resulting in death threats from drug dealers.

The book helps to dispel many of the myths that surround crack use, in particular that it is a ‘poor man’s’ drug. Although the sight of street children openly smoking crack in doorways and public squares is common in Brazil, the drug has now spread to the exclusive neighbourhoods of the moneyed classes. Uchôa recounts the tale of a rich young man of 20, a banker’s son, who began to use crack at 18 at society parties in New York. Back in São Paulo he drives his new imported car to the favela (shanty town) to buy the drug from his personal dealer. On one such occasion he gives the dealer a lift to ‘work’, but as this work involves armed robbery, he ends up acting as the get-away man in an assault on a pharmacy. Others from the same class describe how visits to the favelas have been dispensed with, since their dealers invested in cellular telephones, pagers and a ‘take-away’ service with the drug being delivered to the user’s doorstep, suitably gift-wrapped so as not to call attention.

Having worked with drug users in London, I had become accustomed to the fact that drugs like cocaine, crack and heroin were expensive – patients often quoted prices of around £80 for a gram. In Brazil, a rock of crack is just R\$7.00 (£4.66) – only seven times as expensive as a can of cola. Consequently the drug is even in the

economic reach of homeless children who earn their living by begging. A 13-year-old boy who lives on the streets in the city centre talks about his daily routine. He acts as a ‘runner’ for middle-class customers who arrive by car to buy crack. He takes their money and collects the drug while they stay at a safe distance in their vehicle. His payment is a 50% cut – paid in rocks rather than money. He recounts how crack helps him to forget, in particular the number of times he has been beaten up by the police and how many people he has robbed at gun point. But it also causes paranoia or ‘noia’ as it is more commonly called. In one such paranoid state the boy began firing his gun indiscriminately in the town centre. He does not know if he hit anyone but said he liked the sound the gun made.

One of the most extraordinary stories in the book is that of “Soraia” – a one-recipe ‘cook’, whose activities give a whole new meaning to making rock cakes. In her damp and acrid kitchen, her three seven-litre pressure cookers simmer away for most of the night. She makes about 700 rocks of crack a day, depending on supplies of cocaine powder. Her net income is around R\$9000 (£6000) per month but she pays a large amount in bribes to the local police so that they leave her business alone. “We’re all friends,” she adds, “some are even clients”. Despite her income she continues to live in a dilapidated hovel in the favela. When asked why she does not move to somewhere more salubrious she replies, with almost Shakespearean wisdom, “O dono do pedaço não pode se ausentar [The king of the heap can’t take time off]”.

One of the more heart-breaking stories that Uchôa tells is of the depths of despair to which parents of crack users are often plunged. One mother recounts that when her eldest son became involved in crack his personality changed completely. From being a good boy, popular with the neighbours, he started to become involved in robbery and assaults, regularly hit his younger brothers and verbally abused his parents. One day the family were visited by a couple of strangers who told them that their son owed R\$70 to the leader of the local drug-ring and that if he did not pay up, he would be shot. The family were themselves very poor and had no money to give and knew that their son’s days

were numbered. In despair the boy's mother even thought of poisoning her own son, so that he would be spared the gruesome end that the gang had planned for him. However, when he came home in the evening she did not have the heart to carry it out. Later that night she received the news that her son had been killed with six bullet shots to the head – the usual form of summary execution reserved for those who do not pay their debts to the drug gangs.

Although crack use is reaching epidemic proportions in São Paulo, in Rio de Janeiro, the second largest city in Brazil, the drug has failed to make any significant inroads. At first sight this seems a little surprising. Rio de Janeiro is a port city and forms part of the trafficking route for cocaine. Cocaine itself is widely available in Rio and its distribution is controlled by several extremely well organised and armed gangs that are based in the many large favelas. Although these gangs live in a state of almost open war with the police and military, they are respected in the favelas. The drug trade is big business, employing many people, including guards, dealers, 'watchers' (olheiros) and runners (aviões). A proportion of the money from dealing is ploughed back into community resources, consequently dealers are considered heroes – modern-day Robin Hoods. Uchôa managed to interview several of the movers and shakers in the trafficking business in Rio and was given an explanation as to why crack was not welcome. The dealers pointed to the situation in São Paulo; small time dealing predominates and the system is very disorganised with new dealers appearing all the time. The problem lies with dealer-users – with crack the two roles are incompatible. What usually happens is that these dealers end up becoming dependent on crack and use more than they sell. If crack were to enter the well organised system in Rio, the fear is that the runners, guards and dealers would end up using the drug, rapidly getting hooked on it and use

what they should be selling. The system would collapse, the steady incomes dry up and chaos ensue. Consequently, anyone who wants to get involved with crack does so at their own peril. For example, one of the gang leaders tells how a young boy came to see him one day boasting that he had learnt how to make crack and how wonderful it was. The boy and his family were given one week to get out of the favela, never to return, otherwise they would be shot.

The book is a mine of fascinating and disturbing information that helps those who work with drug dependency to understand better not only the problems that crack causes but the whole subculture that surrounds it. Although the stories I have outlined here are of a somewhat alarming and depressing nature, Uchôa also interviews people who are trying to free themselves from the slavery of crack dependency, several of whom have been successful. The book ends by showing that there is light at the end of the tunnel. For many, crack use may be the first step on the rocky road to self-destruction, but recovery can and does take place.

References

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