

CRS REPORT FOR CONGRESS

HEROIN: LEGALIZATION FOR MEDICAL USE



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July 24, 1984
Updated January 28, 1988

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ABSTRACT

The limited legalization of diacetylmorphine (heroin) for use in the medical treatment of intractable pain is discussed in this CRS report which presents pros and cons on the issue as well as information on pending legislation. The paper also provides a comparison of heroin's analgesic qualities to those of currently available and equivalent pharmaceutical alternatives.

HEROIN: LEGALIZATION FOR MEDICAL USE

Over the past few years a great deal of attention has focused on the emotionally charged issue of whether heroin should be legalized for medical purposes, especially for the terminally ill suffering from intractable pain. Heroin, an opiate derivative, is subject to control under Schedule I of the Controlled Substances Act (Title II of the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970). Drugs placed in Schedule I meet the following criteria: (1) the drug or other substance has a high potential for abuse; (2) the drug or other substance has no currently accepted medical use in treatment in the United States; and (3) there is a lack of accepted safety for use of the drug or substance under medical supervision. Proponents of the legalization of heroin (i.e., having heroin rescheduled, probably down to Schedule II) most often argue that, contrary to the second scheduling requirement of Schedule I (no currently accepted medical use), the substance does have a place of benefit in our armamentarium of drugs to relieve pain.

The principal argument in favor of the use of heroin as an analgesic is that it is more potent and therefore can be administered in smaller doses than most other narcotic analgesics, including morphine. This may be true for early effects in that heroin passes the blood-brain barrier more rapidly than does morphine. However, once in the bloodstream, heroin is then rapidly converted to morphine in the body and acts thereafter as morphine does in pain

control.¹ Further research may uncover subjective or heretofore unknown benefits that may alter this explanation of heroin's mechanism of action.

The following arguments have been made against a change in Federal law to permit the use of heroin to control pain:

1. On an international level, the United States is party to the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, which restricts the use of opium and its derivatives, including heroin.
2. The United States is also party to a World Health Organization agreement, (WHO Assembly Resolution No. 14), to discontinue the medical use of heroin because of its addiction-producing qualities, and because other, less harmful drugs are available for such medical purposes.
3. The action of morphine in larger doses is generally equivalent to that of heroin and in either case dosage must be below that which would produce respiratory arrest.
4. Narcotics control authorities do not want addictive heroin to be legalized for medical use in the United States as this would require careful surveillance in lockup cabinets in American hospitals.
5. Drugs many times more potent than heroin or morphine are being developed for pain control, the attention being focused on decreased tolerance and on an acceptable level of safety and effectiveness.
6. In some cases, the better solution to terminal intractable pain is a cordotomy, a procedure performed by a neurosurgeon in which the appropriate pain nerve is severed.

¹ Jaffe, Jerome H., and William R. Martin. In Goodman and Gilman, The Pharmacological Basis of Therapeutics [7th ed.]. New York, MacMillan, 1985. p. 506.

In order to determine the possible value of heroin compared to other powerful analgesics, the U.S. Government has supported controlled studies conducted by researchers at the Vincent T. Lombardi Cancer Research Center of Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., and the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York. The Sloan-Kettering study was designed to determine the relative potency of intramuscular heroin and morphine in cancer patients with postoperative pain.² The investigators reported the following conclusions:

- (a) heroin was about twice as potent as morphine;
- (b) heroin provided an analgesic peak effect earlier than morphine;
- (c) doses with equal analgesic effects provided comparable improvements in various elements of mood;
- (d) peak mood improvement occurred earlier after administration of heroin;
- (e) both analgesic and mood improvement were less sustained after heroin administration at doses providing equal peak analgesic effects;
- (f) sleepiness was the most frequent side effect after both drugs; and
- (g) heroin has no unique advantages or disadvantages for the relief of pain in patients with cancer.³

The Sloan-Kettering study has been criticized because it was carried out with cancer patients who were experiencing pain following surgery rather than terminally ill patients suffering from pain.⁴ By comparison, the Georgetown

² Kaiko, Robert F., et al. Analgesic and Mood Effects of Heroin and Morphine in Cancer Patients with Postoperative Pain. The New England Journal of Medicine, v. 304, June 18, 1981. p. 1501-5.

³ Ibid., (research article abstract).

⁴ Quattlebaum, Judith H. Letter to the Editor. The Washington Post, July 3, 1981. p. A30.

University study was conducted with terminally ill patients with moderate and severe pain. The medical team at Georgetown also found morphine and heroin to be equally effective, but they noted that heroin, having greater potency and solubility, would be very useful in treating patients who have developed a high level of tolerance to other drugs.⁵

From a pharmacological standpoint, it appears that heroin has no analgesic superiority over morphine or even some other powerful narcotics such as hydromorphone (Dilaudid) or methadone (Dolophine, etc.). In addition, the Food and Drug Administration on January 11, 1984, approved a high potency formulation of hydromorphone named Dilaudid HP. FDA noted in its press release that the drug "will provide pain relief as great as can be obtained with any other narcotic, including heroin, and can be delivered in a very small volume."

The policy question that remains is whether or not heroin should be rescheduled as a controlled substance, and be made available along with other opiate analgesics to treat intractable pain, especially pain so often encountered by patients with terminal illnesses such as cancer. During the 1981 annual meeting of the American Medical Association, the AMA House of Delegates adopted the following resolution:

Resolved, that the American Medical Association endorsed the principle that the management of pain relief in terminal cancer patients should be a medical decision and should take priority over concerns about drug dependence.⁶

Although this resolution avoided mentioning any specific drugs for pain relief, heroin or otherwise, it coincided with various legislative initiatives related to the use of heroin for pain that have been introduced in the recent

⁵ Personal communication with Dr. William Beaver. Department of Oncology, Georgetown University, July 7, 1981.

⁶ Resolution introduced by Dr. Roger J. Smith, Delegate, American Psychiatric Association, and adopted by the American Medical Association, June 9, 1981, during their annual meeting.

Congresses. In the 96th and 97th Congresses, Representative Edward Madigan introduced legislation to authorize the use of heroin for terminally ill cancer patients, and a hearing was held by the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, Subcommittee on Health and the Environment on September 4, 1980. Similar legislation was introduced by Representative Henry Waxman in the 97th Congress and referred to the House Committee on Energy and Commerce. Although the language of the two bills differed, the intent of each was to amend the appropriate statutes to permit the dispensing of heroin for pain relief only to individuals with terminal cancer. Senator Daniel K. Inouye also introduced a bill in the 97th Congress that would amend the Controlled Substances Act and direct the Secretary of Health and Human Services to establish a temporary heroin program under which confiscated heroin would be made available to pharmacies of qualified hospitals for dispensing to cancer patients for the relief of pain. The bill was referred to the Committee on Labor and Human Resources, and requests for executive comment were sought from the Department of Health and Human Services and the Office on Management and Budget.

In the 98th Congress, three bills were introduced in an effort to make heroin available under limited circumstances. On January 26, 1983, Senator Inouye reintroduced his legislation (S. 209) from the previous Congress. On February 6, 1984, Representative Waxman introduced H.R. 4762 which would direct the Secretary (DHHS) to establish a 60-month program under which heroin would be made available by prescription through qualified pharmacies. Hearings on Representative Waxman's proposal were held on March 8, 1984, by the Committee on Energy and Commerce, Subcommittee on Health and the Environment.

During mark-up sessions, a number of significant changes were made to the language of H.R. 4762. Under a temporary program established by the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), diacetylmorphine

(heroin) would be made available to "hospital and hospice pharmacies" rather than pharmacies in general. The drug could only be prescribed to individuals "considered to have terminal cancer if there is histological evidence of a malignancy in the individual and the individual's cancer is generally recognized as a cancer with a high and predictable mortality." The termination date of the program was shortened from 60 to 48 months. Additionally, the Secretary would be required to submit a report to the Congress specifying: 1) the extent of research activities in the management of pain which have received funds through the National Institutes of Health, 2) the ways in which the Federal Government supports the training of health personnel in pain management, and 3) recommendations for expanding and improving the training of health personnel in pain management. The amended legislation (H.R. 5290) was reported to the House (H. Rept. 98-689) from the Committee on Energy and Commerce on April 12, 1984.

The Compassionate Pain Relief Act was brought to the House floor on September 19, 1984, and was subsequently defeated by a vote of 355 to 55. At the time it was speculated that a measure labeled as a "heroin legalization bill" could not be passed in an election year. During the 99th Congress the same legislation was reintroduced (S. 70 and H.R. 1597) but no consideration was given to either bill.

To date, in the 100th Congress, S. 143 and H.R. 1470 have been introduced to establish a temporary program under which diacetylmorphine (heroin) could be used in a limited fashion to treat terminal cancer patients. At this point, it is not clear what the future holds in store for this legislation. The concept of allowing the use of heroin, on a limited basis, to treat patients suffering from intractable pain is more than a decade old. New pain control techniques have been established during this time. New, extremely powerful, pain relieving drugs have been developed coupled with unique delivery systems.

While few would disagree that heroin, like other opiates, has pain relieving ability, others might argue that it no longer rivals more modern methods of pain management.