

***Tracing the scars of addiction: A pathologist reflects on the drug crisis/ Narcotics in India: Medicine, menace, and the road ahead***

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The word "narcotics" evokes images of danger and destruction. The term itself, derived from the Greek word for "to numb," was coined by the ancient physician Galen to describe substances that dull the senses. While narcotics have been consumed for centuries, their dark side has overshadowed their utility since the 1900s, when they were first declared illegal. Despite their prohibition, the allure of narcotics persists, creating a complex web of addiction, health crises, and illicit trade that continues to afflict individuals and societies.

Narcotics come in various forms, derived from natural sources, synthesised chemically, or mixed to amplify their effects. Substances like opium, cannabis, and poppy plant extracts represent plant-based narcotics, while drugs such as LSD and ecstasy are products of chemical synthesis. Regardless of their origin, the effects of these substances can be devastating. For decades, I have witnessed the toll narcotics take on the human body, mind, and social fabric. Medically, narcotics have their place in pain management, particularly for patients battling intractable pain due to terminal illnesses like cancer. Morphine and its derivatives, when used under strict supervision, can alleviate suffering and improve quality of life. However, the same substances, when misused, lead to addiction, dependency, and in many cases, irreversible damage to multiple organ systems.

The pathological effects of narcotics are profound and multifaceted. Neurological symptoms such as neurostimulation and seizures often manifest in chronic users. Cardiovascular complications, including tachycardia, hypertension, myocardial ischemia, and even sudden cardiac arrest, are not uncommon. The lungs suffer equally, with conditions ranging from respiratory failure to lung abscesses and granulomas. Renal complications, such as glomerulonephritis and nephrotic syndrome, highlight the systemic impact of these drugs. Many patients present with overlapping issues, from infections like HIV acquired through shared needles to sudden death due to hypersensitivity or overdose.

\*Over the years, I have seen an alarming variety of cases involving narcotics. Some patients arrive in the emergency room following an overdose, while others come after years of abuse that have left their organs irreparably damaged. What strikes me most is the underlying despair and isolation that drive many individuals to seek solace in narcotics. Yet, this temporary escape comes at a heavy price, one that is borne not only by the users but also by their families and communities.\*

The scale of the global narcotics trade is staggering. Recent estimates suggest that 5.6% of the world's population—around 275 million people—have used narcotics. The market includes a vast range of substances, from cocaine, amphetamines, and marijuana to synthetic drugs like ecstasy and LSD. It is not just the variety of drugs but also the ingenuity of traffickers that challenges enforcement. A recent international operation, Operation Orion, showcased the lengths to which cartels go. Narco-submarines, measuring up to 25 metres and capable of evading conventional surveillance, were intercepted carrying 225 tonnes of cocaine and 1,000 tonnes of marijuana. The scale of these operations underscores the immense demand for narcotics and the lucrative nature of the trade.

India is not immune to this global crisis. The country has long struggled with narcotics trafficking, both as a producer and a consumer. Despite stringent surveillance at ports, airports, and borders, drugs continue to find their way into our cities, towns, and even rural areas. Goa, in particular, has been a hotspot for drug abuse. What began during the hippie era of the 1960s and 1970s has now permeated every corner of the state. Coastal belts, once the epicentre of drug consumption, have given way to a more widespread problem affecting schools, colleges, and even high-profile social circles.

\*As a pathologist practising in Goa for decades, I have encountered numerous cases where the effects of narcotics were evident. Autopsies often reveal severe histopathological changes in the lungs, liver, and kidneys, as well as needle marks and abscesses that tell stories of prolonged abuse. These findings are stark reminders of the destructive potential of these substances, both in life and in death.\*

While Goa has made some strides in addressing this issue through de-addiction centres and counselling services, the scale of the problem demands a more robust approach. Education is paramount. Schools and colleges must incorporate comprehensive drug awareness programmes that not only highlight the dangers of narcotics but also address the psychological and social factors that lead individuals to substance abuse.

Globally, the response to narcotics varies. Some countries have legalised certain substances, while others impose penalties ranging from fines and imprisonment to life sentences or even the death penalty. This lack of uniformity complicates international efforts to combat the narcotics trade. However, advancements in technology, including artificial intelligence, offer new hope for enforcement agencies. AI-driven surveillance and data analysis can help identify trafficking patterns and intercept shipments more effectively.

At the same time, we must not lose sight of the human aspect of this crisis. Dealing with narcotics requires a multi-pronged approach involving law enforcement, healthcare providers, educators, families, and society at large. Health education must emphasise the long-term consequences of drug abuse, while de-addiction services need to be accessible and empathetic.

The new generation holds the key to reversing this trend. By fostering an environment that values mental health, resilience, and community support, we can offer young people alternatives to the dangerous allure of narcotics. As a medical professional, I remain hopeful that with concerted efforts, we can mitigate the impact of this crisis and guide society towards a healthier, drug-free future.

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