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OPEN FORUM

Anti-Drug Programs Miss Mark

Efforts to curb heroin supply fail to affect demand

By Marsha Rosenbaum

THERE WAS ANOTHER heroin overdose in San Francisco last week. This time it was singer Boz Scaggs' 21-year-old son, Oscar. Less than two years ago, Nick Traina, Danielle Steel's 19-year-old son, overdosed on heroin and died. In Plano, Texas, a suburb of Dallas, 11 young people recently died of heroin overdoses.

A natural reaction to these alarming reports is a call for increased efforts to curb availability. The problem is, we're already trying this. The federal drug control budget exceeds \$17 billion a year. Add to that state and local budgets for fighting drugs and the figure may be five times larger. Two-thirds of this money is spent to try to stop drugs from entering the country.

So far, (perhaps because the black market for drugs generates \$64 billion annually), this effort has been a dismal failure. In

fact, since President Reagan began escalating the War on Drugs, worldwide production of opium, from which heroin is made, has expanded. The price of heroin has dropped and its purity has increased. We cannot seem to make a dent in the supply, so heroin is still with us.

Our efforts to reduce demand have fared no better than our efforts to reduce supply. Today's young adults were in grade school when Nancy Reagan first began telling them to "just say no." Again and again, in the schools and on TV, they have been warned about drugs' dangers. Yet for nearly a decade now, drug use among adolescents has been rising. According to government statistics, less than 1 percent have tried heroin, but experts familiar with drug-use patterns believe its use among young people is increasing.

More drug education of the sort existing cannot be expected to reverse these trends. Indeed, study after study shows that current drug education programs have no effect on drug use. Why? They lack credibility. Most programs focus on marijuana, which the programs overly demonize, hoping to frighten young people away from experimentation. Half of American teenagers try marijuana anyway, and once they

learn the dire warnings are not true, they begin to mistrust everything about drugs that adults tell them. And why shouldn't they? Why should they listen at all if they can't believe what we tell them?

The truth about heroin is that it is much more dangerous than marijuana. Anyone who injects heroin with a used needle risks contracting a deadly infection, such as hepatitis or HIV. Anyone who uses heroin steadily for several weeks will begin developing physical dependence on it and suffer withdrawal symptoms if they stop.

People who occasionally use heroin do not become addicted. However, compared to the addict, the occasional heroin user who has not developed tolerance to the drug, is at much greater risk for a fatal overdose. Still, because heroin is unregulated and uncontrolled, even the most experienced user cannot know the potency of a batch of unlabeled white powder.

These are the kinds of warnings we should give young people about heroin. But first we have to get them to listen by convincing them they can trust us. They must also trust that they can come to us in an emergency. "Zero tolerance," another method for deterring young people from experimentation, has meant that too many

have died because their friends were afraid to call parents or other authorities for help. Terrified of being detected themselves, teenagers in Plano, for example, fled the scene, leaving one boy to choke on his own vomit and die.

Like it or not, we cannot seal our borders or completely eliminate demand for drugs. Moral indignation will not change that reality. A more pragmatic approach would be to learn to live with drugs and to focus on reducing drug-related harm. Our first priority ought to be gaining the trust of young people. We ought to offer a scientifically grounded education that allows them to learn all they can about drugs, alcohol and any other substance(s) they ingest.

Young people will ultimately make their own decisions about drug use. When they do, they ought to have information from sources they trust to insure their safety.

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