

“Confessions of an English Opium Eater” Thomas de Quincey’s Addiction

By Lawrence Segel, MD

Thomas de Quincey, a well-established 19th century English journalist, is best remembered for the chronicle of his lifelong addiction to the pleasures and dread of opium entitled, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (first published in 1821). He summed up his tortured addictive life, writing in his novel: “If opium-eating be a sensual pleasure, and if I am bound to confess that I have indulged in it to excess, not yet recorded of any other man, it is no less sure, that I have struggled against this fascinating enthrallment with a religious zeal, and have at length accomplished what I never yet heard attributed to any other man have untwisted, almost to its final links, the accursed chain which fettered me.”¹



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How it all started

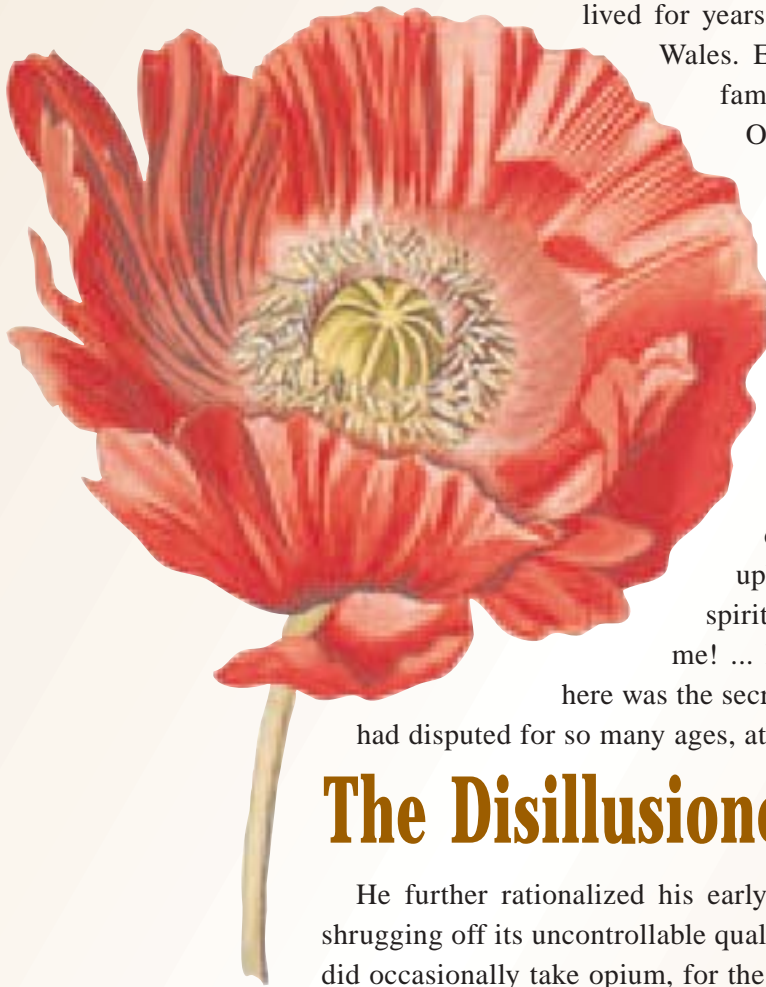
Orphaned at the age of seven, de Quincey was sent away to school where he excelled in languages, but he was bored with academic life. He ran away and lived for years as a vagrant among the street people in Wales. Eventually, through the help of some old family friends he returned to academic life at Oxford. At the age of 28, de Quincey first began to experiment with opium, to relieve gastric pain. The term “opium eater” is rather a misnomer in his case (and many other cases). His usual method of administration was to mix opium with alcohol to make a concoction called laudanum.

His initial reaction was wonderment and a transcendental experience. He described the pleasures of opium as: “an upheaving, from its lowest depths, of inner spirit! What an apocalypse of the world within me! ... Here was a panacea for all human woes; here was the secret of happiness, about which philosophers had disputed for so many ages, at once discovered ...”²

The Disillusioned Addict?

He further rationalized his early addiction, as many other addicts do by shrugging off its uncontrollable qualities. “True it is, that for nearly ten years I did occasionally take opium, for the sake of the exquisite pleasure it gave me; but so long as I took it with this view, I was effectually protected from all material(ly) bad consequences.” As to its intoxicating effect, de Quincey ignored the physicians’ warnings as: “Lies! Lies! Lies!”³

His early exuberance over the joys of opium was eventually replaced by a sobering revelation of its insidious dangers. The addictive qualities resulted in a need for daily use, and he compared the addiction to the body’s most essential functions: “... whether on any particular day he had or had not taken opium, would be to ask whether his lungs had performed respiration, or the heart fulfilled its functions.”⁴ Added to the irresistible craving, he experienced a grad-



ual deterioration, especially of the mind; an intellectual feebleness; an abandonment of daily living, such as paying bills, reading or writing letters; dream-like stupors in which he could not distinguish reality or the passage of time; memory loss; and fits of depression. de Quincey insightfully describes the devastation wrought by opium by saying that the opium-eater loses none of his moral sensibilities or aspirations. He wishes and longs as earnestly as ever to realize what he believes possible, and feels to be exacted by duty. The opium-eater's intellectual apprehension of what is possible infinitely outruns his power, not of execution only, but even of power to attempt execution.

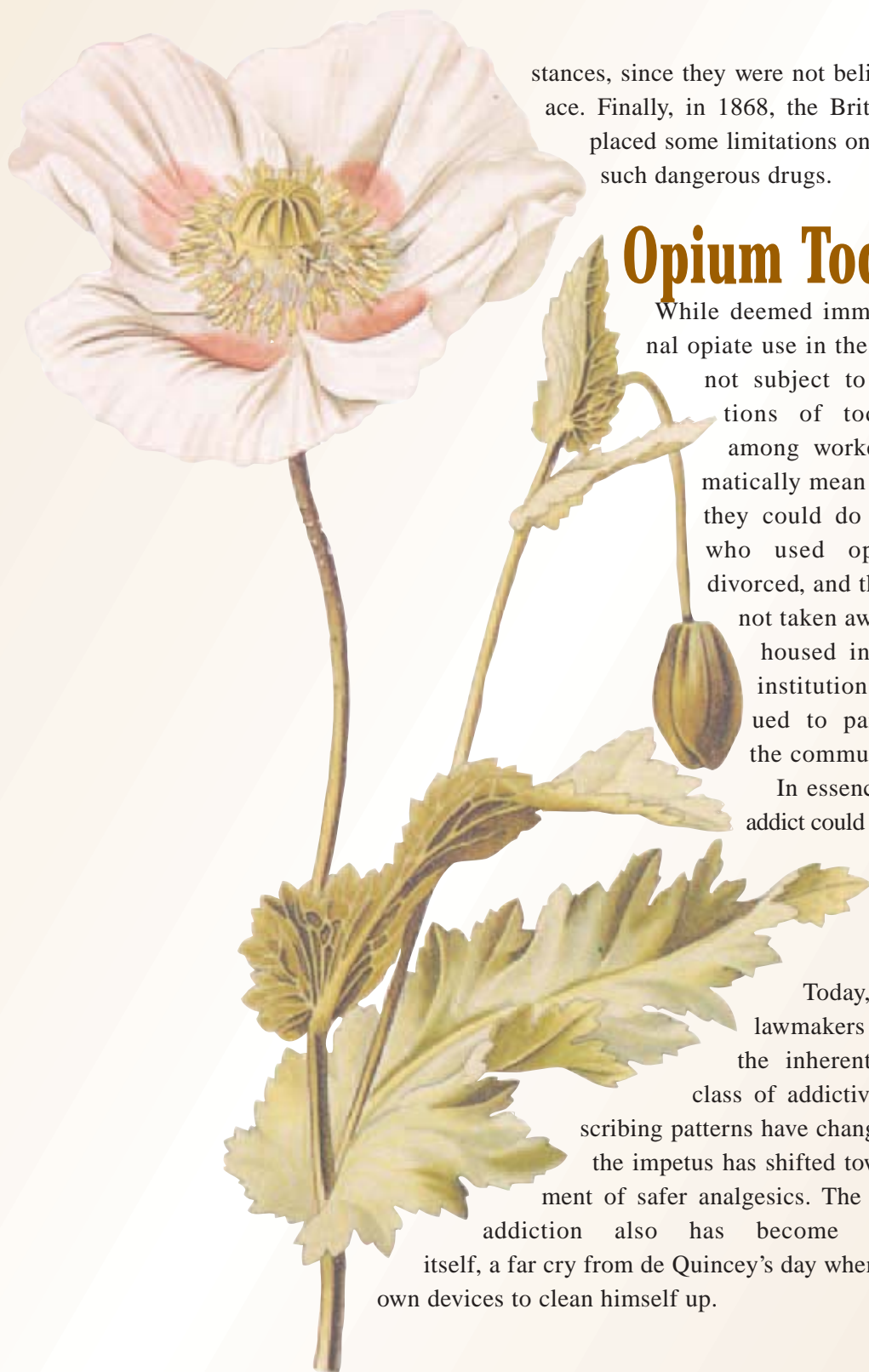
Opium as a Commodity

De Quincey's fascinating chronicle of the 19th century opium addict's life describes a time when such dangerous drugs were as easily obtainable as sugar candy. During the 1800s, all successful European colonial ventures in Asia involved commercialization of drugs, such as caffeine, nicotine or opiates. The burgeoning trade transformed these drugs from luxury goods into commodities of mass consumption. The easy availability of some forms of opium resulted in its common use for pain, sleep and to ward off illness. Physicians dispensed opiates directly to patients.

Apothecaries sold opiates over the counter, and grocery and general stores stocked opiates on the shelf. There was a brisk mail-order business. Even children could not escape its use. Parents often rubbed it onto the gums of teething children. To induce sleep in their children, parents spoon-fed opium so a mother, without provision for child care, could work in the local factory.

Although our 19th century ancestors understood opiates as a will-weakening vice, they still believed anyone could stop using it if they tried hard enough. Opiate use was perceived more as a moral degeneration, as opposed to our modern physiological concept of addiction. There was little popular support for banning these sub-






stances, since they were not believed to be a menace. Finally, in 1868, the British Pharmacy Act placed some limitations on the availability of such dangerous drugs.

Opium Today

While deemed immoral, non-medical opiate use in the 19th century was not subject to the moral sanctions of today. Opiate use among workers did not automatically mean they were fired if they could do the job. Spouses who used opiates were not divorced, and their children were not taken away from them and housed in foster homes or institutions. Addicts continued to participate fully in the community.

In essence, the 19th century addict could avoid the disastrous consequences of being cut off from respectable society.

Today, medicine and our lawmakers clearly recognize the inherent dangers of this class of addictive drugs. Our prescribing patterns have changed drastically and the impetus has shifted towards the development of safer analgesics. The treatment of drug addiction also has become a specialty in itself, a far cry from de Quincey's day when he was left to his own devices to clean himself up.

The war on drugs continues. The use of illegal narcotics and inappropriate prescription drug use have created a virtual tidal wave of addicts. This trend is on the upswing. But, an even-sobering thought prevails, as was the case in de Quincey's time: even physicians are not immune. 

References

1. De Quincey T: Author to Reader. In: *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*. Viking Press, New York, 1971, pp. 1-2.
2. De Quincey T: The Pleasures of Opium. In: *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*. Viking Press, New York, 1971, p. 1.
3. De Quincey T: The Pleasures of Opium. In: *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*. Viking Press, New York, 1971, p. 2.
4. De Quincey T: The Pains of Opium. In: *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*. Viking Press, New York, 1971, p. 3.

Suggested Reading

1. De Quincey T: *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*. Viking Press, New York, 1971.
- The text is available on the Internet at: <http://www.users.lycaeum.org/~sputnik/Ludlow/Texts/Opium>

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