

MEASURES TAKEN BY SINGAPORE IN COMBATING NARCOTICS TRAFFIC

A memorandum by the Government of Singapore

According to Homer, when Ceyx, the King of Thessaly was drowned at sea, Morpheus the God of Dreams was despatched to deliver this dreaded message to Halcyone, his widow. Morpheus broke the news to Halcyone in her sleep through a dream. It was thought that this would help relieve her grief. But it was not to be. When she woke up, the grief over her husband's death turned her into a bird to cry over the troubled seas.¹ In 1806, when the German pharmacist Serturmer isolated and identified the analgesic property in the narcotic drug, he named it after Morpheus, or morphine as it is now better known.

2. The use of morphine as an analgesia was long known to man but its ill-effect was only fully recognised in relatively recent times. The habit of opium-smoking was rampant in Singapore among the early migrants. In 1848, Dr Robert Little, a private practitioner, estimated that 20% of the population in Singapore, then mainly labourers, were opium addicts. He and a few others campaigned to warn the government of the medical and social evils of opium-smoking, but he was dismissed as a crank as the levy on opium was then a substantial part of the government's revenue.² Even as late as 1909, the Opium Commission, after extensive study of the situation in Singapore, reported: "We recommend that improvement should be made in the arrangements of existing opium shops, but we consider there is no necessity of justification for the abolition of such shops".³

3. The consumption and sale of opium and chandu continued to be legal and under licence by the government until after the 2nd World War.⁴ By that time, it was estimated that more than 40,000 Singaporeans, most of them males, had taken to opium. Alarmed at the situation, the British Military Administration in Malaya issued a proclamation banning the sale, consumption and possession of all forms of opium and chandu.⁵

4. Due to sustained and vigorous enforcement and also partly to the fact that opium-smoking had lost its appeal to the younger and more westernised generation, the number of opium addicts had dropped to about 7,000 in 1970. The addicts then were mostly old people and continued to grow older with each passing year. The drug enforcement agencies were then optimistic. They believed that the scourge of the narcotic drugs, after a quarter century of relentless effort, would soon be a thing of the past. They were wrong. For the drugs were soon to return, this time with increased potency and afflicting their miseries on those in their tender years.

5. The drug enforcement agencies traditionally attributed this new wave of drug abuse to the drug experiencing aspect of the hippie culture. It is argued that young westernised Singaporeans worshipped the western idols and tried to imitate them in every way including their drug taking ways. However, a complete and satisfactory explanation on the causes of drug abuse is not easy to find. The sociologists and the psychologists can ruminate over it. We must move on to the problems of drug abuse in Singapore from the 70s onwards and the measures adopted by us to counter them.

6. Statistics showed that in the early 70s young people were mostly arrested for consumption or possession of soft drugs such as cannabis and methaqualone (MX pills). In 1972, of the total of 993 persons arrested who were below the age of 29, 889 of them were involved in soft drugs. 58 were in connection with opium, 34 with morphine and only 2 with heroin.

7. This pattern was to change drastically in the next few years. In the 1960s heroin was a rarity in Singapore. In 1971, only one person had been arrested for consumption of heroin. 3 were arrested in 1972, 10 in 1973. But from then on it spread like wildfire. 110 were arrested in 1974; 2,263 in 1975; 5,682 in 1976 and in 1977 19,888 were arrested. Of these, 18,738, or about 94% were below the age of 30 and over 1,000 were below the age of 16!⁶

8. This time, the government was not caught flatfooted. In November 1971, a new drug control agency was set up with increased manpower to deal with the new situation. The Misuse of Drugs Act was passed in 1973. Under this Act, controlled drugs were divided into 3 classes according to their potency and deleterious effect. Unlawful trafficking in controlled drugs was punishable with heavy maximum and substantial minimum sentence e.g. unlawful traffic of drugs to persons below the age of 18 carried a maximum sentence of 30 years' imprisonment and a minimum of 5. Unauthorised possession and consumption of controlled drugs also carry a sentence of up to 10 years' imprisonment. No minimum sentences, however, were prescribed for these offences. One new aspect of the Act is the provision enabling the Director of the drug enforcement agency to order an addict to undergo compulsory treatment and rehabilitation in an approved institution. In 1974 and 1975 512 and 232 persons were admitted to such rehabilitation centres. Many more were prosecuted and jailed under the 1973 Act, but the problems of drug abuse remained unabated. If at all, we witnessed an even steeper climb in the number of addicts. Those young addicts who in 1972 were experiencing soft drugs had by 1975 moved into hard drugs like heroin and morphine. Also evident from the drugs seized was the fact that the heroin in the illicit market was getting purer and purer in its content.

9. The drug problems in Singapore had by 1975 developed into a national crisis which called for unusual measures and massive mobilisation of resources.

10. Parliament promptly passed an amendment Act to the 1973 Misuse of Drugs Act. The 1975 amendment Act came into force in December 1975. Its main features include:

- (i) death penalty for traffickers and importers who traffic in more than 30 gm of morphine or 15 gm of heroin;
- (ii) death penalty for manufacturers of morphine or heroin;
- (iii) enhanced minimum penalty of 20 years imprisonment and 15 strokes of the cane for those who trafficked in -
 - (a) more than 6 kilogrammes of opium;
 - (b) more than 10 kilogrammes of cannabis;
 - (c) more than 4 kilogrammes of cannabis resin;
 - (d) 20 to 30 grammes of morphine; and
 - (e) 10 to 15 grammes of heroin.
- (iv) enhanced minimum sentence of 5 years imprisonment and 5 strokes of the cane for traffickers of Class A drug (i.e. opium, morphine, heroin).

11. All law enforcement agencies stepped up their enforcement efforts against both drug pushers and abusers. For the year 1975 alone 2,288 pushers and abusers were charged in court. They received penalties ranging from fine to 20 years imprisonment and caning. In 1977, 6 persons were convicted of the offences of trafficking in substantial quantities of heroin and were sentenced to death. 7 traffickers were sentenced to death in 1978. Since then, the number has dropped to the average of 1 or 2 a year.

12. The deleterious effect of the hard drugs and the pervasiveness of their abuse do call for such unusual measures. The constitutionality of the death penalty for drug traffickers

was indeed challenged in court by two convicted prisoners⁷. They argued that the law providing the death penalty for those who trafficked in more than 15 gm of heroin infringed the equality provision of the Constitution; that the 15 gm limit dividing the capital from the non-capital cases was an arbitrary and irrational classification and those who trafficked in more than 15 gms of heroin were unfairly discriminated. The Privy Council rejected the argument. It held, "... Wherever a criminal law provides for a mandatory sentence for an offence there is a possibility that there may be considerable variation in moral blameworthiness, despite the similarity in legal guilt of offenders upon whom the same mandatory sentence must be passed. In the case of murder, a crime that is often committed in the heat of passion, the likelihood of this is very real; it is perhaps more theoretical than real in the case of large scale trafficking in drugs, a crime of which the motive is cold calculated greed". The amount of heroin involved in these capital cases was of course not just 15 gms. Often, they are in the kilos.

13. Prevention of the growth of drug addiction in Singapore, of course, does not depend solely on enforcement actions to stamp out the illicit drug trade. Nor can we ever hope to succeed by using the criminal law alone.

14. Treatment and rehabilitation and more importantly supervision and aftercare are used simultaneously.

15. In April 1977, Singapore started an island-wide exercise called "Operation Ferret" to identify drug addicts and send them for compulsory treatment in institutions. Police and army combed the whole island for suspected addicts. Parks, nightclubs, bars and other places frequented by drug addicts came under repeated raids. Thousands were rounded up and sent for medical examination and urine tests. Confirmed addicts were confined for treatment for periods from 6 months to 2 years. They were then put in a half-way house called the Day Release Centre where they had to return to stay for the night before their final discharge. After their discharge, they were each assigned an aftercare counsellor, usually a volunteer, and had to report weekly to police stations for urine tests. Needless to say, an intensive and sustained campaign of this nature involved thousands of fulltime officers, volunteers and our national servicemen. It involved the police, army, prisons, our health and scientific services. Any discharged addict who was found to have returned to drug consumption was promptly sent back to the institution for further treatment. The Army meanwhile carried out checks on its soldiers for drug addicts. Identified addicts were sent for treatment and recalcitrant offenders were jailed. The purpose of identifying and detaining addicts is both to treat them and to isolate them. Case study showed that peer group influence amongst youths was the major factor for the spreading of drug addiction. Young school dropouts often joined older ones in the same category and experienced drugs together. Older addicts deliberately went looking for new blood. More recruits meant more buyers and more money for drugs. Old drug addicts often were the worst pedlars. The requirements of weekly reporting and urine tests thus ensure that addicts do not remain at large for too long to contaminate others. Some hardcore addicts had since returned many times to the institutions. But many more were successfully rehabilitated under the scheme.

16. In view of Singapore's close proximity to one of the world's largest narcotic drug sources⁸, the Golden Triangle, drugs are relatively inexpensive outside Singapore. Huge profit can therefore be made to smuggle the drugs in. All the entry points in Singapore are vigilantly guarded by the Customs with their narcotic dogs. Many traffickers were detected and prosecuted. But these measures cannot be foolproof against traffickers who are out for big profits. Bombing of the Golden Triangle as the Americans did is also out of the question.⁹ We have therefore invoked the use of our preventive detention laws against traffickers to strengthen our hands. These traffickers are usually the big boys who finance syndicates, negotiate and clinch big deals overseas but are beyond the reach of the long arms of the law. The number of such detentions is only a fraction of the number of prosecutions mounted, but the message sent to the underworld of our resolve is loud and clear. Ruthless? Uncompromising? Maybe. But we offer no apology.

17. Our problems of drug abuse are not yet over. In 1984 we still prosecuted 178 cases of drug trafficking, 414 cases of unlawful possession and 468 cases of unlawful consumption. However, since 1979 the drug scene has taken a turn for the better. We have now fewer cases of fresh addicts. The rates of relapse have also gone down. Major suppliers of illicit drugs turn their attention elsewhere, at least for the time being. We do not have any major case of drug seizure in the last 2 years. Our youths today are far more aware of the dangers of drug abuse than ever before.

18. What about the future? This is always difficult to even hazard a guess. All I can say is that we have the situation under control. The drug scene even under our very strict laws has to be very closely monitored and we have always to be on the look-out for signs of any resurgence.

NOTES ON SOURCE MATERIALS

1. Bulfinch's Mythology, Illustrated Ed. 1978 pp.65 to 70
2. Turnbull, A History of Singapore 1819-1975 pp.64-65
3. Song Ong Siang, One Hundred Years' History of Chinese in Singapore, pp 437-438
4. Chandu Revenue Ordinance Ord. 117, 1909 Laws of Straits Settlements Vol. III 1908 to 1912.
5. British Military Administration Proclamation No. 43: Opium and Chandu Proclamation 1.2.46.
6. Statistics from Central Narcotics Bureau.
7. Ong Ah Chuan v. Public Prosecutor (1981) 1 M.L.J. 64.
8. National Geographic February 1985 pp.150-151.
9. Far Eastern Economic Review 20.2.86 pp.28 and 29.