

A Specialized Medical Center for the Treatment of Drug Abuse and Alcoholism

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The tragic Lebanese war created among the population a great dependency on drugs, alcohol and tranquilizers. In an increasingly violent environment, personality disorders, varied types of depression, anguish, fatigue and insomnia led to an abusive and pathological auto-medication.

No specialized medical institution existed in Lebanon before 1991, the year in which the center was inaugurated. Built on the site of Saint Charles Hospital in Fayadieh, on a pine hill in the suburbs of Beirut, it overlooks the sea and is surrounded by beautiful greenery. The Center presents an ideal setting for treatment and rest. It was founded through donations by psychiatrist, Dr. Antoine Boustany, expert with UNESCO and specialist in drug addiction problems. The Pontifical Mission in Lebanon, the European Community and others contributed financially to the construction and equipment of the Center.

Restricted to 30 beds, divided into 2 units of 15 beds each, the Center offers an optimum at-

mosphere for interaction between patients and staff. A day and night service welcomes the patients and their families and informs them on admission and treatment. A permanent emergency service is secured and the patient is admitted only after a psychiatrist examines the patient. He/she may be directed to a different type of hospital if need be.

The hospital is specialized in disintoxication cure from drug, alcohol and tranquilizer addictions, as well as in the treatment of some mental illnesses. Various up-to-date techniques are used ranging from chemotherapy, individual and group therapy, to cognitive and ego-therapy. The staff consists of a head-

psychiatrist, assistant doctors, residents, clinical psychologists, social workers and nurses, making a total of 33 specialists for 30 patients. Moreover, the Center is an integral part of the Faculty of Medicine of the Lebanese University. It, thus, offers clinical teaching to medical students and later a specialized Center for their training. It regularly organizes seminars and conferences in collaboration with local and international doctors and medical institutions.

I was happy to meet with the founder of the Center and its Director, psychiatrist Dr. Antoine Boustany. I had read his fascinating book **Histoire des Paradis Artificiels, Drogues de Paix, Drogues de Guerre**(1) in which he shows with multidisciplinary knowledge, but also, with humor, that the need to create one's own paradise through various drugs goes far back to our ancestor Adam!

Dr. Boustany began by saying that the word drug refers to a concept not a substance. A drug is anything, an object, a



belief, an activity, a situation, a person, to which or to whom we are extremely attached and which/who yields tremendous pleasure. When this attachment invades us, mobilizes us, goes beyond control, becomes harmful, we talk of addiction and abuse.

Dr. Boustany added that this kind of dependency is often born out of an emotional void and creates high vulnerability. One then turns to a drug for relief. We cannot neglect, Dr. Boustany said, that there is often a biological proneness to drugs.

Generally speaking, there were 3 types of addicts during the Lebanese war:

- 1) The militia people transgressed all social laws by taking Hashish, Cocaine, Heroin, and other drugs.
- 2) The male civilians, when under great stress and fear, turned to alcohol, a socially accepted drug.
- 3) The female civilians turned to tranquilizers under the same ex-

tremely difficult conditions. Alcohol being a "virile" drug in our society, women chose to take Ativan, Lexotanil, Tranxen and so many other pills without any medical advice while men found it humiliating to take tranquilizers. If they did, they did not talk about it. Women became completely dependent on tranquilizers, which is as harmful an addiction as alcohol. Some were taking 15-30 pills a day when they reached hospital, with all the consequences it entailed: bad need for money, great debts, running away from home, etc... Interestingly, these women came from all social classes.

The disintoxication cure usually takes 3-4 weeks with the common withdrawal symptoms in the first 8 days accompanied by acute pain in the body, irritability, insomnia, and even hallucination. The percentage of the success of the cure is usually high when the reasons for addiction are treatable, chemically and psychologically. If the patient is willing to cooperate with the psychiatrist, he/she

stands a good chance of being cured. Otherwise, a relapse quickly takes place.

The impact of the war, Dr. Boustany said, was certainly traumatic for it was a chronic source of anxiety, fear and even despair. More specifically in the case of married women, the war brought forth to the surface latent problems with their husbands. Stuck together in a house or a shelter without the ordinary routine of work and socializing couples were brutally confronted with deeply hidden conflicts with their corollary ailments.

Drug addiction ensued to escape these problems often leading to hospitalization. The Center for the Treatment of Drug Abuse & Alcoholism is certainly badly needed in our society.

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(1) Boustany, Antoine. *Histoire des Paradis Artificiels, Drogues de Paix, Drogues de Guerre (A History of Artificial Paradises, Drugs for Peace, Drugs for War)*. Paris: Hachette, 1993.