

A brief history of VSA

The practice of solvent abuse is by no means a modern phenomenon. The deliberate inhalation of substances, which can produce an intoxicated state, dates back at least as far as the ancient Greek and other civilisations, where it was an adjunct to religious practice. Vapour inhalation has a long history, dating back to the rituals at the Oracle of Delphi, where priestesses induced trance by inhaling the vapours from crevices in rocks. There is a distinct thread of mysticism, prophecy, and worship, using vapour inhalation in all cultures, and incense and other aromatic materials are still used as part of worship in a number of religions.

Volatile Substance Abuse as we know it involves the inhalation of vapours from a number of substances, which then enter the body via the large surface of the lungs, providing easy access to the body and the rapid onset of effects. Today the range of abusable products is extremely broad and incorporates most products containing solvents such as toluene, hexanes, heptanes, ethyl acetate, isopropyl acetate, acetone, methyl ethyl ketone, methylene chloride and trichloroethane. As a group these chemicals act as cerebral depressants and may carry other potential health risks. Commonly abused products include cleaning fluids, lighter fuels, nail polish remover, paint thinners and aerosol products. Butane gas lighter refills were the cause of the highest number of VSA deaths in the UK between 1971 and 2006, totalling 900 deaths. The problem of solvent abuse is now widespread and varied, not only in Britain and the USA, but also in Africa, Australia, Canada, Fiji, Finland, Japan, Central and South America and throughout Europe.

Historical background

Nitrous oxide, sometimes known as 'laughing gas' was commonly used for its intoxicating effects during the nineteenth century and was particularly popular amongst prominent figures such as Coleridge, Roget and Wedgwood. Its effects were described as good, delightful, intoxicating and relaxing, and it was considered the genteel way of getting drunk. There were public exhibitions in Britain and the USA, with the intention of illustrating the medical value of the gas as an anaesthetic. One example was of a man who sustained cuts and bruises while under the influence of nitrous oxide but felt no pain. Today nitrous oxide is used as a propellant, for example in whipped cream dispensers, and most cases of abuse today involve those who have access to commercial gadgets which produce whipped cream, or those associated with dentistry. In 2006 we have seen a worrying return of nitrous oxide with 5 deaths attributed to the gas.

During periods of deprivation in Europe, Britain, and the USA in the nineteenth century, and in Germany during the Second World War, **ether** was commonly drunk as a substitute for alcohol. It was seen as a cheap and permissible form of alcohol during the temperance crusades throughout the British Isles in 1840, but was also used in midwifery around the same time. Hans Christian Andersen noted the effects of ether in his diary, commenting on the lifeless eyes of the ladies who used it.

In the nineteenth century, ether and **chloroform** were commonly in use as anaesthetics and became popular for recreational use along with nitrous oxide which was already popular at 'sniffing parties'. English and American medical students commonly used ether for intoxication or 'ether frolics'. Both chloroform and ether are volatile liquids, which give off a concentrated vapour. Experimentation with these and nitrous oxide goes back a long time and has not disappeared. There are isolated reports of chloroform inhalation, and instances of nitrous oxide sniffing have appeared in medical literature, most prevalently amongst those with easy access to the substances, such as laboratory and hospital staff.

The first cases of deliberate misuse of volatile chemicals occurred among young people in America in the 1950s, who inhaled the fumes from **gasoline**. There were reports of sporadic petrol sniffing in Australia, India and Great Britain from the 1950s. The clinical presentations of gasoline sniffing are similar to those of LSD, resulting in odd behaviour, hallucinations and unusual and unexpected temper tantrums.

The first reports of **glue sniffing** arose in the mid twentieth century, with arrests in Tuscan, Arizona and Pueblo, Colorado. There was a wave of publicity following an article on glue sniffing in a Denver newspaper, with warnings in the papers and on television. Ten months later, Denver had an enormous glue-sniffing problem. By 1965 glue sniffing occurred in every state of the USA. In the UK, VSA was still at a comfortable distance until reports of glue sniffing a few years later, and by the 1970s, the problem was becoming more prevalent.