

VI.A. Recognising heroin

and other opiates

The heroin encountered in South Africa usually appears as a white ('Thai white') or brown ('brown sugar') powder, synthesised from the sap of the opium poppy, cultivated in Central Asia (especially Afghanistan) and Southeast Asia (especially Myanmar). Columbia and Mexico also produce heroin, but there is no evidence that these countries are supplying South Africa.

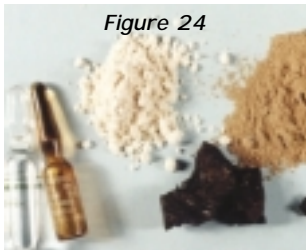
Heroin is related to other products derived from the opium poppy, including opium itself, as well as the pharmaceuticals morphine, methadone, codeine, oxycodone ('percs'), pethidine, and dipipanone ('pinks' – Welconol). Figure 24 shows white and brown heroin, raw opium, as well as ampoules of synthetic opiates.

Heroin can be packaged in a variety of ways, the most common being simple plastic (especially balloons or grocery packet wraps), foil, or paper wraps of various sorts (Figure 25). It can be snorted, smoked, swallowed, or injected. The most common method of ingestion at this point in South Africa is smoking, using a technique referred to as 'chasing the dragon' or simply 'chasing'. The heroin is vapourised by placing it on aluminium foil and heating with lighter, while the fumes are sucked up through a straw or other device. The foil and the suction device may both contain sufficient heroin for a conviction.

Injection is unfortunately becoming increasingly common in this country, as has been the trend elsewhere. The drug is mixed with water and heated, usually using a metal spoon (which will appear blackened) and a lighter. The liquid heroin is drawn into a syringe through a cotton ball or cigarette filter and the user injects this into a blood vessel, usually in the arm, but other parts of the body may be used, such as

the foot or the neck. A tourniquet may be used to bring up veins, often a belt or a length of rubber hose. Any of these devices could contain traces of heroin, and should be seized as evidence (Figure 26).

Figure 24



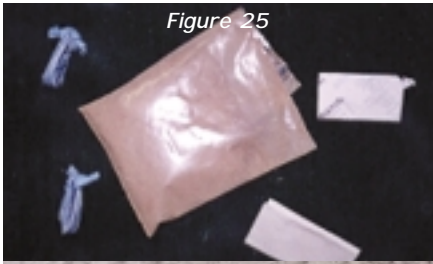


Figure 25



Figure 26

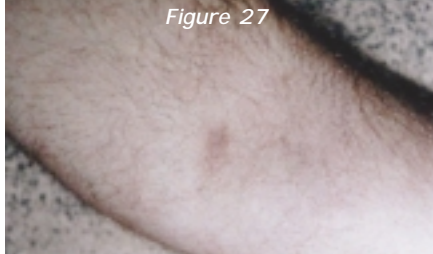


Figure 27

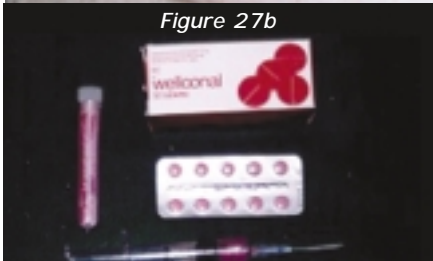


Figure 27b

Experienced users suffer from collapsed veins in the arm and must use injection sites elsewhere. Scarring left by repeated injection is known as 'track marks' (Figure 27), and users may attempt to conceal these with long sleeves or tattoos. Spoons and syringes may contain trace heroin, but all needles should be handled with extreme care.

The most popular synthetic opiate in South Africa is the pharmaceutical painkiller Welconol, known on the street as 'pinks'. This drug is dissolved in water and injected like heroin. It appears as a pink tablet, often found in the original bubble packaging (Figure 27b).