

It's been a hard night's day...

by Yee Jee Tso

The following imaginary scenarios illustrate some possible pitfalls of sedative-hypnotic drugs.

Jon is a successful stockbroker. A hard worker, he is a social drinker and occasionally indulges in cocaine. Increasing job-related anxiety and an unforeseen stock-market crash made it hard for Jon to sleep restfully. As a result, he started to take over-the-counter sleep aids before bed.

Diphenhydramine hydrochloride is the active ingredient in almost all over-the-counter sleep aids on the market today. As prolonged use of the drug causes Jon's body to build tolerance, the maximum recommended dose of 200mg a day is no longer helping his sleeping problems. He increases the dose, and discovers that a trip to the bar before bedtime has desirable effects. After a while he begins noticing side effects, including drowsiness, dizziness, nausea, blurred vision, and headaches. The hangovers from his sleeping pill/vodka cocktails begin to affect his work. Eventually he decides to ask his doctor for stronger sleep aids.

Benzodiazepines (benzos) and their derivatives are the most prescribed class of drugs in the world and in history. Estimated annual world sales exceed \$21 billion. Canadian sales are \$104 million. They are widely used to treat anxiety, panic disorders and insomnia because they cause sedation.

Jon's doctor gives him a prescription for flurazepam, a drug in the benzo class specifically used to treat sleep disorders. This seems to be fairly effective for his insomnia, but his drug dealer has brought it to his attention that this medication is worthless on the black market. An upgrade to Valium or Ativan would bring him a dollar a pill in exchange for the increasing amount of cocaine that he is consuming. The drug dealer advises Jon to get multiple prescriptions from every doctor in the area (the practice of "doctor shopping" or "double dipping"). An estimated 30% of people receive their benzo prescriptions from more than one doctor.

As his evening routine becomes more and more about washing down prescription drugs, Jon begins to experience daytime withdrawal symptoms including ataxia, dizziness, drowsiness and fatigue. Unfortunately, Jon's more serious symptoms such as memory impairment, irritability, slurred speech, and confusion, affect his work, and he is fired. Jon is an example of a person who slowly incorporates prescription benzos into his existing addiction cycle. It is common for alcoholics

or ex-heroin addicts to become addicted to benzos to curb their drug problem or to enhance their high.

But many people become addicted to benzos alone unintentionally. An estimated 60% of sleeping pills and tranquilizer users become accidentally addicted and suffer adverse reactions. Forty three per cent of emergency-room suicide attempts or overdoses involve sedative-hypnotic drugs. In British Columbia, benzo prescriptions surpassed all other Pharmacare prescriptions for women in 1997. Cross addictions to other drugs and alcohol can also result from benzo addiction.

Jane is a mother of two children in her late thirties, and was recently widowed. She has been experiencing anxiety, insomnia, and depression for some time. Her doctor prescribes a three-week course of benzodiazepines. During treatment, Jane experiences some cognitive impairment and loss of motor skills. Three weeks later when she stops the medication she begins to experience panic attacks, depression, and mood swings. She is prescribed another type of benzo, only this time her medication seems to be far less effective and the withdrawal symptoms worse. She is instructed to continue with the benzo treatment indefinitely, in combination with a selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitor, a common class of antidepressant. After a while, the side effects of the drugs become more debilitating than the initial symptoms. When Jane tries weaning herself off them, she experiences crippling anxiety and depression, more severe than anything she has felt before.

Not everyone reacts like Jane to these types of drugs, but for those who do, the road to recovery is a long and harrowing experience, likened to that of heroin and cocaine addicts. Sedative-hypnotic drugs have historically caused problems due to their abuse potential and side effects. These powerful psychoactive prescription medications are a double-edged sword; they can be helpful for some people in the short term, but may lead to accidental addiction in others, unless they are monitored carefully.

References:

<http://www.benzo.org.uk>
Joan Gadsby, "Addiction by Prescription", Key Porter, 2000

The Street Sense column addresses issues involving substance abuse. Yee Jee Tso is a Vancouver-based actor, musician, and freelance writer.