

## Addicts brave withdrawal trial

By Dave Howard  
Five Live Report

**Six heroin addicts agreed to spend the last week in a remote Scottish farmhouse in a trial of a controversial detox treatment involving Neuro-Electric Therapy to the brain.**

**A BBC Five Live reporter has been living in the house to assess how they get on.**

"Look, can you see it filling up with blood now?" Ronnie is injecting himself with heroin. "I'm pushing it in, I'm pushing it in, I'm pushing it in".

Ronnie gets his hit and passes out. David, next to him on the bed, digs into his own arms with a needle, over and over again, trying to find a useable vein.

He is becoming increasingly afraid. He is feeling the onset of heroin withdrawal - the dreaded "rattles".

He pulls his tourniquet tighter round his arm, and talks about his 14-year-old son.

He has told him this is the time he will finally get clean: "Of course, he gives you the eyes. I've heard that before Dad, know what I mean?"

### Controversial treatment

It's Friday night. On Saturday morning, Ronnie, David, and four other addicts will become guinea-pigs.

They have agreed to take part in a trial of Neuro-Electric Therapy - a controversial addiction treatment that involves having low electrical pulses transmitted into the brain.

NET, as it is known, was developed in the 1970s by Scottish doctor, Meg Patterson.

It has been used on private patients including rock musicians Eric Clapton and Pete Townshend, from The Who.

But three decades later, Dr Patterson's family are still trying to convince a sceptical medical profession it could be a viable treatment for the UK's 360,000 heroin addicts.

They hope this trial - the first of its kind to take place in the UK - will help their cause.

The NET box is about the size of a personal stereo, it's got a 9-volt battery and it is attached behind each ear by electrodes.

### Natural painkillers

The theory goes, that specific pulses pushed through the head stimulate the brain's painkillers, known as endorphins, and ease the pain of drug withdrawal.

Apart from electrical stimulation, the addicts are given nothing to ease the pain.

Lorne Patterson, Meg's oldest son and the chief clinician on this trial, says NET works on the brain like the choke works on a car.

"When the engine's sluggish, you pull the choke out. We are taking a process (of withdrawal) that normally takes weeks, months, or years, and we are accelerating that natural process to within six to ten days."

This first UK group trial was not an unmitigated success. Ronnie and David were the first to quit - after just 36 hours.

When they left, silver foil and heroin paraphernalia were found in a bathroom they had both been using.

It emerged later that two other addicts had also been smoking heroin within the farmhouse. Cracks in security that had seemed obvious to some were in danger of ruining the trial.

Questions are still being asked - How did drugs get into the house? Why did nobody think to search the addicts' baggage?

### Determination

Four down. Two to go. Alan is a talented artist who hasn't painted or drawn since he first got hooked, and Glen, who was taking levels of opiates that left drugs-workers shaking their heads in disbelief.

"90millilitres of methadone? Every day?? On top of his heroin? He'll be the one to crack first. Bound to be," they said.

From the outset though, Glen and Alan seemed to have more determination than the other four. And that appears to have made all the difference.

Now, at the end of trial, both appear, so far as can be told, to have successfully kicked their habits.

Watching someone as heroin leaves their system is like watching a corpse come back to life.

Hour by hour, as their detox progressed, almost everything about Alan and Glen changed. They went from deathly-pale to ruddy-cheeked.

They underwent waves of emotion, as their feelings came rushing back to them.

The heroin, it was explained, had been suppressing their senses. As it left their system, emotion came back, sob by sob.

### **Smell food**

They explained they were thinking, for the first time, about the people they had hurt over the years of their addiction.

They sniffed the air and gazed out of windows, saying they could smell food and see birds for the first time since they started using.

As experiments go, two successes out of six subjects does not look ideal. But if Alan and Glen are both able to stay off heroin, that's two families with their dads back.

Both men said afterwards they would not have been able to stick to drug-free withdrawal without the help of NET.

Where does this trial leave the Patterson family, and their attempt to prove Neuro-Electric Therapy actually works?

I suspect, not where they want to be. But there is enough money in the pot for one more try, starting in two weeks time.

They say they will try to clamp down on security, learn from their mistakes, and have another go.

● **Five Live Report, "Hooked Up" will be broadcast as part of the Julian Worricker programme Sunday 4th February at 1100 GMT.**

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