

Is this the answer to heroin addiction?

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March 09 2006

In an overheated living-room in Bearsden, Barry, a 24-year-old kitchen-fitter from Kilmarnock is sitting awkwardly, one of his long, lanky legs bent up beside him. The heat has been cranked up in case he gets the shivers. He is pale and, initially, expressionless, his silvery skin almost translucent under the lights. There is a huddle of bruises on the inside of his elbow. He seems a bit uptight.

We chat for a while, small talk mostly just to get acquainted. After a while, Barry begins to relax. He points to **a half-opened amaryllis sitting on the window sill in the evening sunshine. "You see that flower over there? That's me," he says. "It hasn't blossomed yet, but it's coming out, slowly but surely. By the end of the week, it'll be in full bloom."**

Barry is 49 hours into heroin detox at the hands of Net, neuroelectric therapy.

Transmitted from a small box the size of a pack of cards, which sits in his pocket and is wired-up behind his ear, Net supplies low-level currents to Barry's brain. The treatment's supporters say it is an alternative to methadone and want Jack McConnell to listen; its critics say it is a techno-fix, a placebo effect that has no scientific basis.

Barry says it works. Just into day three, and, although he's not feeling great and has slight nausea and sweats, he says he's not "rattlin" "the user-lingo for the overwhelming symptoms of withdrawal" like he has done in the past.

This is Barry's fifth attempt at kicking the "devil's dandruff" as he calls it. A heroin user for three years, he has cut his habit down to a tenner bag (0.1g) a day, "jagging" half a bag in the morning, half in the evening, "just to feel normal," he says. There was a time, however, when he was using 10 bags a day, selling drugs and stealing from his family to feed his habit.

Barry has tried every detox regime on the market: dyhydracodeine and valium, in-patient, out-patient, cold turkey and methadone. At one point, he was using both methadone and heroin simultaneously. This time, Barry says he's had enough: "I was never like this. It's time to stop."

Barry's withdrawal is being supervised by psychiatric nurse, Rebecca Yagci, an independent who has worked in addiction for eight years. She stays with Barry 16 hours a day, recording his progress and providing him with support. She says she was sceptical about Net at first. "I was there to pick holes in it and I was prepared to do that, but I do now believe it works." The whole process is being filmed by Norman Stone, Bafta winner and husband of broadcaster Sally Magnusson.

I visit Barry again on day six, "he took off his Net headset the day before. He's cheery, animated and the colour is back in his cheeks. "It worked. I knew it was time to take it off. I just felt better," he says. He's positive, but realistic about his experience.

"I wouldn't say it was easy, but it was easier than before. In the first few days, when I was speaking to somebody, I could still see clearly in front of me a spoon, a needle and a bag of heroin and that's all I wanted to do. But as the days went on, that picture was going further and further away from me and now it's away. It's probably there, still shining in the distance, but I can't see it shining back at me," he says.

Three weeks later and Barry is still clean. He wants to share his story to let others know about the treatment and get Net up the political agenda. And his timing is spot-on. It comes in the same week Jack McConnell announced a review of the use of methadone in drug rehabilitation programmes. The first minister's action was prompted by the death of a two-year-old boy. Derek Doran, from Elphinstone in East Lothian, died after drinking methadone given to his parents as treatment for heroin addiction.

Net is not without its contro-versy. Invented by Scottish surgeon Dr Meg Patterson in the 1970s, it has a 90% success rate according to the inventor's family. Its supporters say the device can detox an addict off most drugs "opiates, cocaine, amphetamines, nicotine and alcohol or combinations thereof" within seven to 10 days, with a 70% reduction in withdrawal and craving, and a recidivism rate of just 10%. Among Net's better-known success stories are Eric Clapton and Pete Townshend, who are said to have used Net to come off drugs.

In Scotland in the 1970s there was a flurry of interest in Nets, but it was later dismissed as having no real scientific validity. Now, two community organisations in Glasgow "the Third Step, a charity set up by Peter Howson and John Mullen to fund the rehabilitation of drink and drug addicts and sponsor of Stone's film, and the Maxie Richards Foundation, which also supports young people through rehab "want to change that and are lobbying for Net's development in Scotland. However, to launch a pilot scheme will cost £1m.

This "magic box", as some call it, is said to work by restoring the bio-chemical balance of the brain back to what it was before a person started using drugs. Dr Patterson stumbled across the therapy while working as a surgeon in a hospital in Hong Kong and returned to the UK to develop her theories. She also set up pilot schemes testing Net around the world. Her first results in 1984 reported that, after using Net, 95% of 102 consecutive patients claimed they were free of craving, 75% said they were free of anxiety. Meanwhile, the drop-out rate for Net was 1.6% over seven years.

However, further clinical trials carried out in Pennsylvania in 1992 "the most comprehensive test of the treatment to date according to medics and which the Patterson family participated in "concluded that Net had a placebo effect and urged further research.

Dr Patterson died in 2002, but her son, Lorne Patterson, along with other family members and interested parties, has been developing Net for commercial use. They now have pilot programmes in Australia, US, Romania and Ukraine.

Lorne, a psychiatric nurse, came to Glasgow to oversee Barry's treatment personally. Patterson says no major study has been carried out into the process because of a lack of funding. He feels Net was never taken seriously because it emanated from China and also, as a surgeon, not a psychiatrist, his mother was not deemed qualified to work in the area of addiction.

He says: "We in the west have an attitude that requires medicine and medicine needs a pill. Also, the focus of all addiction research is around pharmacology. That's where

the money's going; that's where the time is being invested and that leaves us [Net] marginalised."

Dr Neil McKeganey, director of the Centre for Drug Misuse Research at Glasgow University, supports Patterson in his efforts. McKeganey visited Barry on day three of the treatment. He said he was unable to pinpoint which one in the room was the addict.

McKeganey thinks the time is right for Net to come back on the political agenda and hopes it will get the proper research in Scotland he thinks it deserves. "Net is a potential tool which, if it is effective, could help us address the issues of how you get what is now 20,000 on methadone and 50,000 on heroin off the drugs on which they are dependent," he says. "The important thing is we should know how effective it is; we should do the research and evaluate it.

"The possibility that we might have a tool that was helpful some 20 or 30 years ago and has just languished and not been used as our drug problem has cut a swathe like wildfire through our society, that should make many people feel some culpability. At a minimum we should know if it is effective or not."

But Dr Mike Simpson, a doctor with an interest in addiction, disagrees. He also visited Barry on day three. Simpson believes Net was merely a placebo. "The only trials that have shown it to be any use have been substantially flawed and the only trials conducted in a rigorous fashion have shown it to be placebo.

"The reason we use methadone is that we have 40 years of data that shows it is effective and reduces massively the death rate. It has to be done closely supervised, and there are risks to methadone but there are risks with any kind of treatment."

But Barry remains convinced Net is an alternative and says his experience of withdrawal was different this time. "When you detox, it takes a long time to get back into a proper way of thinking, to get any sense of happiness back." "It happens in slow stages, coming back one at a time. I feel this week has just brought everything back. I am happy again, I have bundles of energy, I am thinking about the future. That has never happened before. You must see a difference?"