

# Clean streets

Getting up heroin is the easy part – staying off it is the real fight. **Kathy Evans** talks to those who have kicked the habit. Some have been clean for a few months, some for years but, for each of them, it's a lifetime struggle.

"John", a company director, is one of the lucky few who have beaten their heroin addiction – in his case through the naltrexone detoxification program.

The house is a gem, nestled halfway down a cul-de-sac in a salubrious outer Melbourne suburb. The family boat is parked in the driveway, squeezed between a silver Saab and a gleaming new Mazda. Behind the brick frontage, the setting sun makes looming dark shapes of the Dandenongs. The sounds of the city are far away. But from penthouse to pavement is not that far, so the saying goes.

Kylie and Darryn Elgin\* are former white-collar junkies, a brother and sister whose addiction to heroin drew them into the secret world of the addict. Today the pair have snapped back into their regular lives and are pretty much model citizens, without so much as a track mark on their arms.

But the mental scars of living from hit to hit are still vivid.

Both look radiant with middle-class health as they curl up on the plush white sofas next to the

fireplace, in casual Rip Curl surf wear. Their father serves Earl Grey tea before retiring to the veranda strewn with fairy lights and candles. It's a million miles from the Edinburgh squalor of the film *Trainspotting*.

Darryn, 20, tanned and muscular from running his own business as a landscape gardener, is initially reluctant to talk about his life as an addict. He is determined his drug binges are over. It has been 51 days since he last used, and counting.

"I just got into the wrong group of friends after leaving school," Darryn shrugs. "I had a bit more money than I needed because I'd been dealing marijuana for a few years.

"I saw a lot of people going down on heroin, but I thought it would never happen to me. I wasn't down or anything at the time. I started smoking it, then I was shooting up every day.

"It probably took me five days from the first hit

to get dependent on it. I think it's a truly psychological thing, when you are willing to be addicted to something, you will be.

"I've had a go at overdosing. It was a sort of suicide attempt. It wasn't that I wanted to die, it's just that I didn't care if I did. The guilt and the shame just gets to you. When you're on heroin, it psychologically screws you up, you become unacceptable to society, it changes you as a person."

Darryn made regular trips to Glen Waverley and other areas of the city from the family home in Knox to score. If his parents, both management consultants, had any idea what was going on, they kept quiet. "They probably knew already but didn't want to know, if you know what I mean. They suspected the worst. I've always been fairly open with them, but I didn't see how I could tell them about this."

Paradoxically, it was a car accident that possibly

Photographs by Michael Rayner, Penny Stephens and Rob Banks.

## "People think heroin belongs to the homeless, or people living in inner-city back streets, they don't expect people like me to be a junkie."

His last binge landed him in court two months ago on theft charges to fund his addiction. Lucky for him, the judge was sympathetic and let him off a prison sentence when he heard he was trying to stay clean. Now he sees a counsellor once a week as part of the court order, and is due to go into a residential rehab unit for three months in the next few weeks. Until then, he has to be accompanied by a family member at all times. His mum goes gardening with him.

"I went to the casino the other night and, by chance, I saw my dealer. For five seconds, it crossed my mind that I could go and score, but I let it pass. I had no real interest, there's too much to lose."

Darryn detoxed himself at home, with no drugs and only his family for support. "The first week is the hardest with the aches and the pains, but once you get through that, it's not bad. It depends on your state of mind. I mean, I really wanted to get off it, but not everyone who gives up really wants to.

"I have my own business, and I found that really helped. I didn't miss a day of work, I just kept going. It helps you focus.

"I feel good," he states. "It's much different this time, I couldn't go back on it now. I'm lucky, I have a very supportive family. I couldn't cope with disappointing them again. People think heroin belongs to the homeless, or people living in inner-city back streets, they don't expect people like me to be a junkie.

"I'm back to where I should have been when I was younger, I've got goals. I don't blame anyone but myself.

"I was lucky my parents never pushed me away. When you know your parents love you, it is better than any drug. For a long time, I never sat around the dinner table and talked to my family, now I make sure I sit down with them every night, it's a wonderful feeling. At least heroin has taught me to value my family."

Darryn wanders off to have a smoke on the veranda. He says one day he'll kick the fags. Probably a good move since statistically they're more likely to kill you. Seventy per cent of all drug-related deaths are due to nicotine, whereas heroin claims just 2 per cent.

KYLIE, 25, THE ELDEST OF THE FOUR ELGIN children, wanders in, blond, tanned and unlined, looking like a model for *Good Health* magazine. She has been hooked on party drugs since she was a teenager and got involved in heroin four years ago. "I liked drugs," she says. "Some people like alcohol, but I liked drugs, cocaine, ecstasy, speed. Then I had a really bad relationship break-up. He was violent and all that, and a friend said to me one night after a party, 'I've got a surprise for you', and he gave me some heroin. It was wonderful, and I said, 'where can I get more' so he took me down to Russell Street and showed me how to score."

Kylie was living in Toorak at the time and had just resigned from a job as a marketing and sales manager with a small firm. In four weeks, she was due to start work at a radio station but, in that short space, her life switched course.

"By the time I started the new job, I was hooked and I only lasted a week. It was a few months, I think - when you're on drugs, you can't remember a lot of stuff - before I was at the stage where I had to have a syringe by my bed so I could get a hit before I got up. I'd wake in the morning, inject, then get up. It was the only way I could make it to the bathroom. It hurt too much to walk down the hall and feel your bones so hollow.

"I don't know how much I was spending. I didn't have to thief but I did. It was just too easy. I'd go into the shops and take people's wallets, nobody

ever suspected me because, although I was thin, I was always very well presented and talked the right way, I was not your typical stereotype junkie. No one would ever have picked me out as such.

"I was using about seven months before my parents found out. I remember, I felt really ashamed because it was Christmas time and I was going home, and I was determined not to use, but I did. I drove into the city on Christmas Day. I didn't worry about buying stuff.

"The police used to be three cars up in an unmarked car, and I'd be scoring. My parents didn't take it very well. This was the second time they'd had to deal with it. I knew about Darryn's problem, but I was living away from home and we kept our lives pretty separate. Also I was so trashed most of the time.

"My mum suspected what was going on and she basically confronted me. It was pretty obvious by the state of me.

"I had a friend up in Sydney and he invited me to spend time with him and get myself sorted out, and they basically bought me a one-way ticket. I suppose I felt they pushed me away, my mum didn't want to speak to me, and it hurt.

"Sydney worked well to begin with. I did detox on my own, but he kept treating me like a victim, so I left. I couldn't work, all my emotions were surfacing after being suppressed for so long and I just wandered around in tears all the time."

It was at that point Kylie met a man who became instrumental in her fight with drugs.

"He had a cousin who had been on heroin, so he knew what I was going through. Financially, he helped me out, I was on the dole and I'd run up huge debts.

"When I started recovering I went from 45 kilos to 63 kilos and I just felt huge, but he made me feel so good about my new body. He loved me no matter what shape I was."

That was last March, but the tears are fresh, the wounds still raw. Since then there has been one relapse, but Kylie has slowly slotted back into mainstream society, finding a job, paying off debts, going to yoga classes with her mum.

"I think people who take drugs are searching. Any drug you put in you just shows you what state you can have naturally. It's nothing outside your mind, only what your mind can comprehend. Since I've come off drugs I've achieved a sense of euphoria, which I never thought would be possible without chemical help. I used to think I had to give up drugs because I was hurting everybody else, but I didn't want to lose the buzz.

"The hardest thing was not the physical withdrawal, but the emotional part. The guilt when you think of what you've put your family through, the shame of being an addict. It just hits you.

"Before, I've wanted to change so much about my life, but now I don't want to change a thing. I'm grateful to heroin, I've learnt so much about things. I used to be so analytical, but now I just accept things so much more. If I'm having a no-smile day, then so be it. I accept that, rather than look for some deep meaning or a fix."

KYLIE AND DARRYN'S MOTHER, DONNA,\* A TINY red-haired woman with an elfin face, struggles to remain composed as she talks about life with two drug-dependent children.

"It tore our family apart and, at the same time, it brought us closer together," Donna says. "It is hard to describe the isolation and the desperation. Every corner we turned to for help was met with a blank wall.

"The methods we used for dealing with each child were totally different. With Darryn, we just had to stay and support him,

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saved him. "I'd just got my licence and was in a car crash and I punctured my spleen. I didn't know it at the time, but a week later I started to feel really sick, and I had this pain across the chest. I couldn't sleep, couldn't breathe. I panicked, I thought it was the drug."

I said to my parents: "Look, I'm sick, I think it's the heroin." He says his parents took the news well, considering they didn't know he was involved. "They couldn't push me away."

That was a year and a half ago. Since then, Darryn has made several attempts to kick the habit, going cold turkey each time. After his first attempt, in which he went 189 days without a hit, he was ditched by his girlfriend. He took the next day off work and went looking to score. "I'd been up all night, but the pain of separation was too much," he says. "My boss said I'd lose my job if I took the day off, but I told him I didn't care. I was really cut up."



The detox room at a private Melbourne hospital, where patients lie sedated for 24 hours while the drug does its work.

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but with Kylie, we had to disassociate ourselves, even her brothers had to. She was a lot more streetwise and I knew she'd cope on her own. Darryn would have collapsed, I think, if we'd done the same to him. Eventually, it was the isolation from her family which I believe helped her overcome it.

"I knew when she came home that Christmas she was on heroin. I'd seen the signs in Darryn. She was sleeping a lot, she wouldn't get herself organised. I kept saying, 'let's go Christmas shopping', but she was too tired.

"When your child is on heroin, you know. Their personalities change, my kids became quite aggressive one minute, out of it the next. You couldn't argue with them, they could never see anyone else's point of view.

"I went to our local shops once and I saw the police and ambulance drivers milling around the back of the car park. It turned out that a kid had overdosed and died. I can't remember going into the shop, doing what I had to, and coming home. I went upstairs and told Darryn and he was like 'yeah, so what ...' and I went mad. I was in such a rage, I was screaming and crying and hitting out. I was so scared."

Like most parents of addicts, Donna did not know where to turn for support. "I lost friends because they could not come to terms with the fact that we had a heroin problem in the family. They

just thought it was something that belonged on the street.

"The frustration was the hardest thing. I was trying desperately to get Darryn into rehab, but the waiting list was so long, months away, and all I could think of was my son would be dead by then.

"Darryn only got into rehab in the end because he broke the law and it was a condition of his court order."

She gives a resigned smile. "To look at us, no one would guess what was going on. I mean, we look like the ideal family. Sure, we're not perfect, but we've always been able to talk about things. We talked about drugs when the kids were growing up.

"Looking back, you can always say I wish I'd done things differently. I am just thankful that our family has stuck together like glue, otherwise they'd never have got through this."

ACCORDING TO DR MICHAEL KOZMINSKY, A Melbourne GP who was one of the first in the state to prescribe the detoxification drug naltrexone, heroin use among the wealthier classes is growing.

"The caricature of the homeless junkie hassling people for money is not the full story," he says. "I have had some very high-achieving people and to look at them you'd say 'this person has everything' but they are not able to live up to their own expectations of themselves. The other group, which seems to be on the increase, is the yuppie, those who have more money than sense. That's a group I

wasn't seeing much of a few years ago."

Since he began prescribing naltrexone two years ago under a special licence, more than 1000 patients seeking treatment have passed through the door of his practice in Bay Street, Brighton. The drug, which was recently approved by Commonwealth Authorities for general prescription, is used in two ways. The controversial rapid-detox method involves sending patients to a hospital where they are sedated and given medication to counteract the symptoms of withdrawal, such as vomiting and diarrhoea. Naltrexone is then introduced into the body, which caps the opiate receptors in the brain, blocking the heroin high. Conventional detox, with or without prescription tablets, usually takes about a week, but the rapid detox method takes just 24 hours. And the patient is sedated throughout, avoiding the most unpleasant side-effects.

The cheaper option is to detox yourself at home, with the support of a GP, family or friends, and then sign up for naltrexone maintenance, at a cost of about \$200 for a month's supply. A tablet a day removes the craving, and stops the high if you relapse and shoot up. Patients are recommended to stay on it for at least a year.

The cost of naltrexone means it is not an option for less wealthy addicts, a point not ignored by Dr Kozminsky, who has written to John Howard urging it be put on the National Health Scheme. As it stands, only medications that are deemed life-saving are subsidised by the government.

## "Naltrexone and other substitution narcotics make people feel nothing, neither high nor low, but they stop them knocking off BMWs and stealing people's wallets."

Although he claims the program has a two-thirds success rate over a period of five months, Kozminsky is reluctant to laud the results. "A lot of people focus on the rapid detox like it's a magic cure, but all it does is create an opportunity. We need a policy to help addicts while they are using, and to help them come off and stay off."

"The debate has been hijacked by individual statements such as 'we need heroin trials' and 'we've got to get tough on crime'. We need a holistic approach. Anyone who thinks a single intervention at a single point in time works is living in cloud-cuckoo land. We are talking about a chronic disease."

Pity the user who tries to get into a non-government organisation rehabilitation centre, often the first port of call. According to a survey published by Sydney's Network Alcohol and Drug Agencies, demand for places in residential units in New South Wales continues to exceed capacity. Six in 10 people assessed for admission are turned away, the main reason is insufficient beds.

The report says the 2321 places throughout the state must be more than doubled to meet demand. Those seeking counselling as out-patients do not fare much better. Only about half receive treatment.

**JOHN CONNORS,\* 36, A MARRIED MAN FROM Melbourne's south-west suburbs, runs his own flourishing manufacturing company. He underwent rapid detox six weeks ago and is on naltrexone maintenance.**

"I started on heroin a few years ago when my first marriage was breaking up. I had a friend who was on it and he offered me some. I was down in the dumps and it really helped. If you want to block something out of your life, it's the best thing in the world."

"For the first four or five months, I was taking it every week, it just got habit forming. It doesn't take long to build up a tolerance. Then I did it for a few days in a row, and the next thing was, it had me. That's how easy it is. It's got you before you know it. You wake up thinking, I've got to have some today."

"It took me almost a year to realise I had a problem and, initially, I went on methadone. I didn't really look into things, I just heard on the grapevine that methadone was what you took."

"It was worse than heroin. It is a lot more addictive and a lot harder to get off, very powerful. I did actually get off it by reducing the dose. I still used when I was on methadone."

"In November 1996, I was one of the first to take part in the naltrexone trials. It was \$180 a month. It was all done the hard way then, I came off the methadone and detoxed myself, and spent 12 days clean. Four months later, I broke my leg and was treated with morphine in the hospital. That was it, the ball started rolling again and I was shooting up."

"I got remarried and my new wife didn't know I was on heroin. You become very cunning, it really rules your life. Like I couldn't keep syringes in the house. I have three kids and another one on the way. I had daily emotional tugs of war with myself, I didn't like what I was doing. My wife found out when I detoxed the second time and she has been fantastic. It's a big weight off my shoulders."

"I did the rapid detox at a private hospital. It cost me \$3500. I take naltrexone tablets every day and I expect to stay on them for a year."

"I think the big problem is that unless you have money you won't get treatment. I am fortunate but, for a street junkie, there's nothing out there. I'm doing all the right things now, I'm getting counselling, I'm going to Narcotics Anonymous. Coming off drugs is not the problem, staying off them is."

"Look, I'd be lying if I said I didn't think about heroin at all now. I do. But I have no desire to go out and score. The craving for it has gone. I don't get tempted."

"Taking naltrexone is just a small part of it, you need an awful lot of help and support. Some of these kids are teenagers with no support, no family whatsoever. It's a social problem but they've got no social skills."

WHILE NALTREXONE HAS BEEN HAILED AS A wonder drug by many grateful patients, others remain sceptical.

Deb Homburg, from the Buoyancy Foundation of Victoria, a charity that provides therapies and counselling for 2000 drug and alcohol users, says: "Naltrexone is a quick-fix mentality. It's about trying to fix something straight away, rather than removing people from a drug culture and putting them into something that will do them less harm."

"Naltrexone, methadone and other substitution narcotics, which are currently being trialled in Australia, make people feel nothing, neither high or low, but they stop them knocking off BMWs and stealing people's wallets and so they are seen as good methods of social control. If people want to stop taking heroin, all that's available is substitution."

"What we do at Buoyancy is find out what they want to do with their life, and we try and work towards that."

The program is based on Holland's Arta Rehabilitation Centre, which claims a 78 per cent success rate over a seven-year period. But the Dutch counterpart has bigger budgets and an on-site detox unit.

"Our measure of success is the number of users who become contributors to society, like get a job, a house, or taking in nutrients as well as poisons."

"We are not an abstinence model, we are more into harm minimisation."

"The people who take naltrexone and methadone can claim success, because they are able to swap one drug for another. But these are the people more likely to end up in the Coroner's Court because overdoses from drug use are more common when people are using pharmaceuticals as well as illegal drugs."

Figures from the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine show that while there were 271 deaths from intravenous overdoses last year, only 59 were due to heroin alone.

Overall, the number of intravenous deaths in Victoria has increased 180 per cent since the start of the decade. So why has it risen so dramatically? According to Annie Madden, of the New South Wales User and AIDS Association, part of the problem is the quantity of heroin now available on the street. "For a long time, Asia was the dominant market and supplied the world, but now Columbia has started to produce for the States, and Pakistan supplies Europe and the UK, so all the surplus heroin in Asia is coming here. The quality is much better, too. It's just very easy to get. If you decided you wanted to use heroin it's five minutes away."

Depending on whom you talk to, the number of heroin users in Australia ranges anywhere from 49,000 to 150,000. And that doesn't take into account those who use heroin for recreational purposes, maybe once a month. As with cigarettes and alcohol, not everyone becomes an addict.

Neither do the figures include the 23,000 Australians hooked on the Government-sanctioned opiate, methadone. To rehabilitate one heroin user costs more than \$10,000 a year, to maintain them on methadone is a fifth of the price. But the reality with methadone is that once you are on it, it's hard to get off.

And while experts insist there is no evidence that



Deb Hamburg of Buoyancy: "Naltrexone is a quick-fix mentality."

it is more addictive than heroin, users tell a different story.

**LUCY RYAN\* IS THE DAUGHTER OF A BUSY corporate bigwig and an alcoholic mother. Over coffee in a Brunswick Street cafe, she lights a cigarette and opens the door on her life as a recovering addict.**

At 27, she is a stunning woman with a mop of red curls and deep green eyes. Only her brown-stained teeth show the wear and tear of 10 years of addiction to heroin and methadone. "Once you are hooked on methadone, it is much harder to come off than heroin. It's not a bad idea for two weeks or so, but in the long term, it's a death sentence," she says. "No one told me what would happen with long-term use. I've lost nine teeth through repeat infections, and two more are to come out."

"One for each year. They've just rotted taking methadone syrup."

"It takes away the withdrawal symptoms but it turns you into a zombie. And you are so tied to it. It was a pain having to get up every morning and go to the chemist and be treated like shit. Because of the stigma of being a drug addict, the pharmacy staff assume you are going to pinch stuff from the shelves. I used to walk down the middle of the aisle with my arms firmly stuck to my sides."

Lucy's life began in a way that would earn most parents' approval. As a child, she showed an aptitude for the cello and took lessons with a noted Melbourne teacher. At six years, she realised all was not right in her middle-class home. "I discovered my mum was an alcoholic," she says.

Her parents split up when she was a teenager and Lucy found herself lumped with a stepmother she did not get on with. So, at 15, she went to live with her mum in a small town in country Victoria.

"By that time, I was really quite rebellious, you know, dyed blonde streak in my hair, and pierced nose, and my stepmother desperately wanted to be the executive's wife so she used to drag me off to Sportsgirl to buy me pink clothes. I wouldn't conform and she made it quite clear she didn't want me around."

"I first tried heroin when I was 16 and wasn't impressed at all. My mother died of a brain haemorrhage when I was 17. I was devastated, I went out and took heroin for the second time and this time it worked. It blocked out the pain. I took it again, the next day and the day after that."

"Then I got to the stage

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when I couldn't afford it. I'd supported my habit for so long doing topless bar work and running a beauty business, but I had to start selling my mother's antique furniture to raise the money for it. I could never get enough. At that stage, it was costing about \$100 a day. You get used to feeling like shit, feeling depressed."

It was at that stage she first tried methadone and managed to stay off heroin for three months. Then she ran into a couple of dealers and was back on it again, at the same time visiting the chemist for her daily dose. "I had a boyfriend who was using other drugs. The first time I showed him what to do, I overdosed. I missed my vein, and thinking that it wasn't taking effect, I injected some more. I was virtually unconscious, I was given naran to reverse the effects. It scared me, but not for long."

At 22, Lucy became pregnant. "It was a real shock. My boyfriend was rapt, he's very maternal. He'd been doing a science degree but he pulled out

and got a job in a hospital to help support us, the drugs were screwing his chances of finishing the course anyway. When I found out I was pregnant, I was very concerned about how the methadone would affect the baby. I still continued to use heroin and I felt guilty every time I shot up. I was very careful, I didn't share needles, though I had before, out of desperation. I've got Hepatitis C. Listen, if anyone tells you they haven't used dirty needles at one time or another, they're bullshitting.

"When my baby was born, she went into withdrawal from the methadone and the heroin and had to be put in special care for three-and-a-half weeks, where she was gradually weaned off. The staff in the chemical dependency unit at the Royal Women's were tremendously supportive and non-judgmental."

There is an air of poignancy when she talks about her life as a mum: "At first, I was really into it, like a lot of people when you are expected to fail at something you tend to over-compensate. My house

was absolutely spotless, you could have put my baby next to any straight woman's and you wouldn't have been able to tell which one was the child of a heroin user. I was doing well, my father was beginning to talk to me again, and my boyfriend was great with the baby. And then I got pregnant again, just six months later and I really wasn't ready. I always do what other people expect me to do, I try and please people too much, and there was a lot of pressure to have that child, and I went along with it, knowing I wasn't ready. I admit I used a lot of heroin in the next pregnancy while being on methadone and again, when my second daughter was born, she went into withdrawal.

"My boyfriend was now on methadone and he became a zombie. He gave up his job and just sat on the couch all day, I began to hate him. We had no money and I used to pinch food from the shops, which I hated. We also got food vouchers from welfare, which I'm not proud of.

"Things just became impossible when the girls were toddlers. As babies, I could just about cope but with two of them running around everywhere ..." She shrugs.

"I was using a lot of heroin, then I'd stop for a week and think 'what's the point' and start again. I think I was a good mother, I was still over-compensating, but God it was difficult.

"Every day, I'd have to take them with me and go and get my methadone, which was a real struggle, carting two of them. I got sick of the way of life, having to move every six or seven months because we couldn't afford to pay the rent. I was sick of the shit, sick of having no money so I ended up marrying an illegal immigrant for \$5000.

"I tried going to a drug detox unit at a private hospital, because the methadone program was driving me insane. We told the kids that mummy had gone on holiday. When I came out, my dad paid for me and a girlfriend to go to Perth for a week, but after two days I was in so much pain, both physical and mental, I caught the next plane home. When you detox, you start getting in touch with your emotions and it's really scary. It's such a weird feeling after feeling nothing for so long. They say when you come off drugs you go back to the age you were when you started taking them. I suppose all the old emotions just started to rise.

"Anyway, I didn't like it. After two months of going mad and using heavily, I signed up on the methadone programme again. I took 15 millilitres, and half an hour later I was emotionally dead again." Last June, Lucy persuaded her father to pay \$3500 needed to undergo rapid detox.

Since then she has been off the methadone and heroin and takes naltrexone and antidepressants.

She lives by herself and has seen her children twice since Christmas. "I need a bit of space to sort myself out, I needed to cut myself off from everything," she says, tinkering with the teaspoon. "I know the kids are safe with their dad. He has done rapid detox as well, and he's clean. I want to get a job in the country and a house and have them come live with me. I realise I can't associate myself with anyone who uses heroin. You have to completely change your lifestyle.

"It's a long hard road and it's not easy. It's day-by-day stuff. It's really scary learning to live with the daily drudge of life that you've never had to face before. It's about changing a learnt behaviour. I still do things now, like take all the money out of my account when I get it, to pay for heroin, which I don't need. I think all my life I've been depressed. That may be the reason I took heroin in the first place. But I don't feel that way now." She smiles as if to prove the point. Her teeth may be brown but her green eyes are clear. ■

\* Names have been changed to protect identities.

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