

HEROIN TREATMENT

Rehab costs R22 000 an addict

Natasha Prince
STAFF REPORTER

JUST one heroin addict seeking rehabilitation can cost the province up to R22 000 for treatment. And many of these patients have multiple relapses and can run up costs of around R100 000 a year.

Shafiek Davids from the Sultan Bahu Treatment Centre referred to a study conducted by the Medical Research Council (MRC) which showed that in 2007 to 2008, an estimated 11 percent of heroin users were seeking treatment.

During that period the number of heroin users ranged between 15 000 and 18 000.

Davids said people in government knew a long time ago that the numbers were high.

"Can you imagine how many users there are in the Western Cape today?" he asked.



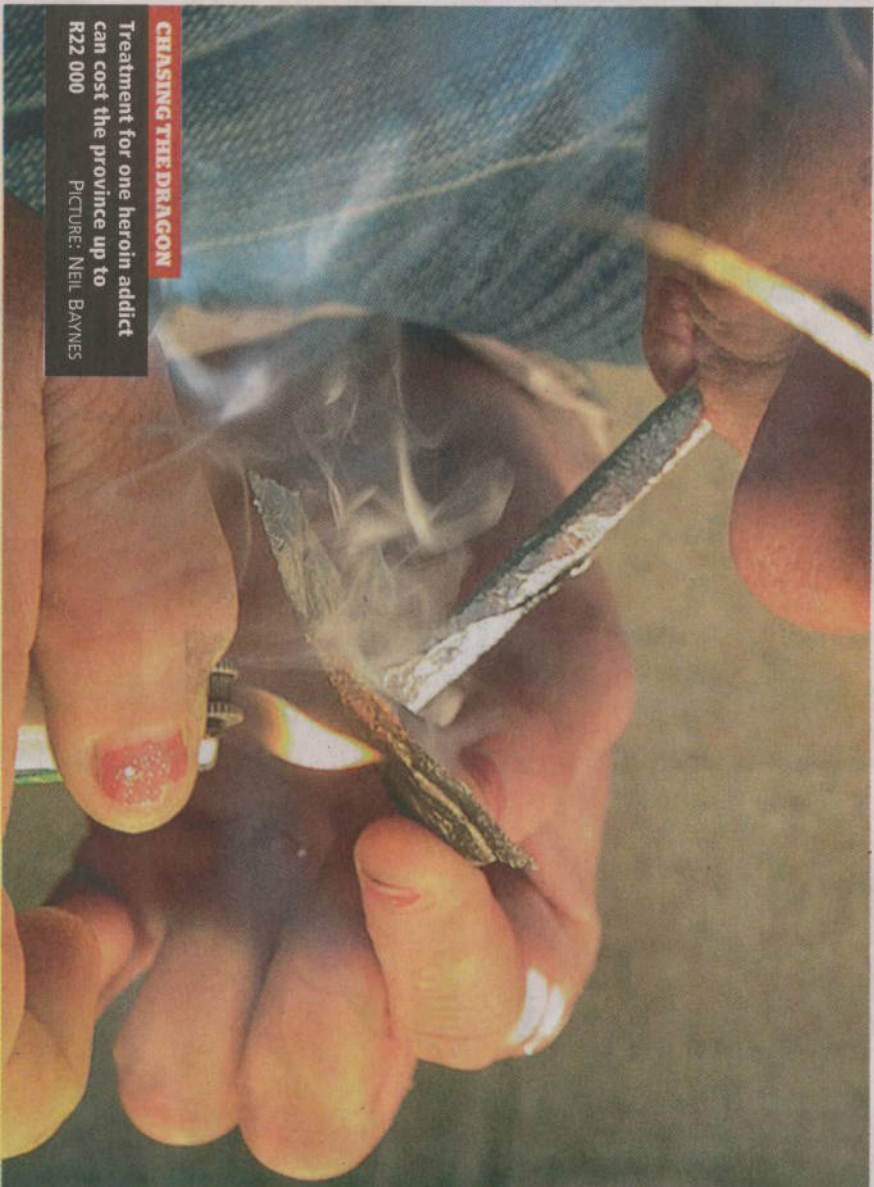
It is estimated that 18 percent of users are now seeking treatment.

"Alarm bells should have gone off a long time ago," Davids said.

Chris Prins, a psychologist based at the Ramot Centre in Bellville, said that like alcohol, heroin had heavy physical effects in terms of withdrawal.

"You feel very bad, they sometimes tell me that you feel like you're going to die."

Prins said that there was a misconception that patients were left to sweat it out in a cold room on the floor.



CHASING THE DRAGON
Treatment for one heroin addict can cost the province up to R22 000
PICTURE: NEIL BAYNES

He said that for all drug addicts – whether they had taken uppers or downers – the end result was always depression.

The Sultan Bahu Centre often refers heroin users to a treatment centre – the Opiate Detox Unit in Stikland.

There, the Western Cape Health Department provides in-patient detoxification for addicts who stay be-

tween five and 10 days.

The treatment does not cure the addiction, but treats the physical withdrawal, and patients can do psycho-social treatment in order to prevent relapses.

The department uses a number of medications – mainly buprenorphine/naloxone or methadone – along with a number of symptomatic medications

and follows international treatment guidelines.

The Health Department's Faiza Steyn said that among the challenges the department faced was that heroin dependence was a treatment-resistant disorder and most patients had relapses – often soon after finishing their detoxification treatment.

natasha.prince@ml.co.za