
Franklin D. Roosevelt — “The Great Communicator”

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Message on Narcotic Addiction

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Memorandum for Governor Roosevelt regarding Narcotic Situation.

I am deeply disturbed at the reports that come to me from various sources about the spreading use of dangerous habit-forming narcotics. Therefore I am organizing a Governor's Committee for the study of "narcotic evils".

Up to now the public has not understood the real depth of the narcotic menace. During the last ten years there has been an educational campaign to make us wake up and yet the evil has grown to a point where it is in many quarters undermining our national life.

Daily information comes to us about the moral and civic devastation in the wake of the narcotic drug evil. From coast to coast we hear the sad stories of what narcotics are doing. The federal government has gradually stepped into the narcotic situation and passed some laws and set up a certain system which is presumed to control the drug evil. Meanwhile the states have gotten into the habit of leaving control of the drug evil to the federal courts and yet the states have definite rights which are neither surrendered to the federal government nor used effectively by the states themselves. The net result is that the entire drug control in the U. S. is in the hands of small groups of federal agents. The evil has grown appallingly under this control and it is about time in my opinion for the Empire State to take up this question, go to the very bottom of it and try to stamp it out before it is too late.

You who agree to serve on this advisory committee should deal with this subject thoroughly. Treat the drug evil as you would treat a foreign foe. It is a foreign foe because it is a foreign business which apparently will go on, unless we can stop it, as long as American dollars can be obtained by these foreign interests.

The results up to date of the Narcotic Conference now in progress in Geneva indicate how little likelihood there is of limiting the manufacture of narcotics to any possible legitimate requirements.

From my information, I do not hesitate to state that unless the narcotic evil is dealt with severely and effectively we will within ten or fifteen years rue it as the greatest error made in the history of our nation. You have a serious and important task ahead of you and you will face powerful interests that will oppose and seek to trick you under the pretense of helping you, and it will be to your everlasting honor if you can show how to stamp out this evil in New York State.

As I see it, the subject divides itself into various phases.

They are:

1. A determination of the exact narcotic drug necessities in New York State for legitimate medical purposes.
2. The treatment for those who are addicts.
3. What laws can the State of New York pass to prevent the making of more addicts? By this I mean how can we modify and make more effective legal control over these drugs.
4. In what way should New York State invite and bring about co-operation with other states and with the federal government? What system can be devised to keep absolute track of narcotic for legitimate

purposes? How can we strike terror to the illegitimate drug peddlars, large and small through the imposition of severe prison sentences?

On the subject of drug addiction I suggest that you give careful study to the report of the New York City Mayor's Committee on Drug Addiction recently filed by Commissioner Richard C. Patterson, Jr. of that city and drawn up by Dr. Alexander Lambert and a group of noted associates. This report deals purely with the treatment of those who are narcotic addicts.

May I urge that you seek to answer among the many questions that will arise the following specific questions:

1. To what extent have the several states sought to curb the use of habit-forming drugs?
2. To what extent may substitutes be used in the place of any of those drugs?
3. How can New York State control the handling of such drugs-
 - (a) Should we set up a state agency under the control of the state medical authorities to buy, receive, transport, sell and dispense the habit-forming drugs which the medical profession might consider as absolutely necessary?
 - (b) Should we forbid the importation into this state of all such drugs unless confined to such state agency?
 - (c) Should the state have county dispensaries from which such drugs could be secured only by physicians, who would have to account to the state for every fraction of an ounce of such drug?
 - (d) Should we allow specially licensed and specially bonded drug stores to get such narcotics from county dispensaries and should we require such drug stores and county dispensaries to file with the State Health department copies of medical prescriptions received by them, all prescriptions written by each doctor to find their way into one filing place of easy access to the authorities under special license numbers to be given to prescribing physicians, such as are now given to regular physicians by the federal government.

4. What suggestions have the American Academy of Medicine and other important medical societies to offer for control over the type of physician who may for mere profit or from lack of knowledge be too ready to prescribe such narcotics?

5. Should we ask the federal government to prohibit the interstate use of prescriptions for narcotics? Should we forbid the filling in New York State of a prescription written by a doctor not a resident of and not registered within this State except in the case of extreme emergency which must be stated on the back of the emergency prescription?

6. Should we ask the federal government to make it a serious crime to use United States mails for sending habit-forming drugs or any mixture containing them or any prescription for them?

7. What safeguard can be set up against the possibility of any licensed agency sending out fake or adulterated narcotics on legitimate prescriptions, while the real and unadulterated narcotics are sold for high prices to criminal drug peddlars or to drug addicts?

8. Should a special bureau of detection be established by the State of New York?

9. What differentiation should be made in laws governing adults convicted of narcotic crimes as against laws for very young minors who may be used by drug peddlars without full realization of the crime with which they are connected?

10. What difference should there be in the laws governing the possession of narcotics by peddlars who are making a business of the possession and sale of them as against possession by the unfortunate addict of the drug? Should not the drug victim be treated more leniently than the vicious drug vendor? Would this make convictions easier?

May I ask that you give me by May 1, 1930 a preliminary report of your progress and meanwhile if you see anything I can do to help make your investigation successful, please advise me. Please understand you are a Governor's advisory committee working towards the actual stamping out of the narcotic drug evil. You are not a prosecuting commission.

~~It~~ In some times I have been receiving
disturbing reports about the spread of the
use of narcotics. These come not only
from private citizens and private social
organizations but also from state officials.
The illegal use of narcotics is increasingly
a factor in the ^{general} health of the state, in
the institutions under the Department of
Social Welfare, in the insane asylums
and in the prisons and reformatories.
In other words "dope" is ~~in~~ very definitely
entering into all of our ^{mental and physical} health and
correctional state work.

This problem is far more grave
than it was even ten years ago,
~~as~~ in spite of the activities of the
Federal government agencies, which
were not so well able to cope with
the situation.

Furthermore we must look at

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it not only from the existing ~~§~~ facts, but also from the point of view of how a continuance of the situation will affect the crime problem and the health problem in 1940.

This menace is with us; it is today a rattlesnake which can be killed, but in another ten years it may be a plague reaching into every home and every community.