

Stressed out university students abuse Ritalin

BY IDELLA STURINO

MONTREAL (CUP) — It used to be caffeine and caffeine pills. Then it was amphetamines like speed. Now, it seems that Ritalin is fast becoming the stimulant of choice for stressed-out university students.

Attracted by its concentration-enhancing effects, many students across North America have turned to methylphenidate, manufactured under the brand name Ritalin, as a boost for late-night study sessions. The drug is normally prescribed to treat Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), but has surfaced on the underground market on campuses as a study aid.

The concern about the drug's abuse is the latest strain in a growing public discourse about Ritalin and the condition which it is meant to treat.

Ritalin prescriptions have more than quadrupled in Canada in the past five years, and there are worries that prescription of the drug following misdiagnosis may be marring the reputation and effectiveness of a legitimate treatment for Attention Deficit Disorder.

For the past few years, newspaper reports across the U.S. have pointed to Ritalin abuse by students at New England universities and prep schools, and last March, the American Drug Enforcement Administration warned that teenagers were misusing the drug. Now similar reports of abuse have surfaced in Canada.

In Montreal, public attention was focused on Ritalin abuse when a Jan. 22 Montreal Gazette article boasted the headline: "Students popping Ritalin to stay alert". Referring to McGill and Concordia universities, the article claimed that thousands of

students were taking Ritalin to help them study.

While officials at Concordia University say they have not seen any evidence of Ritalin abuse among students at their school, representatives of McGill's health services concede that, while the numbers are hard to quantify, some students are probably using Ritalin illicitly.

"We can't [quantify] it, but our impression is that it is being abused just like anywhere else. We're no different," said Pierre Paul Tellier, director of health services at McGill.

Several McGill students surveyed for this article said that they had heard of Ritalin being used as a study aid on the campus.

"I've heard it makes you study and it doesn't put you to sleep," said Mike, a first-year McGill student who asked that his real name not be used.

While he says he hasn't tried Ritalin himself, Mike says he has several friends who have.

"You get it through a friend," he adds. "People say it's not hard to get."

Norman Hoffman, director of McGill's mental health service, said several students have told him that Ritalin is readily available and inexpensive on campus. But like Tellier, Hoffman admits that it is difficult to estimate exactly just how many McGill students are abusing Ritalin.

"Someone will come in and say they know 10 to 20 students who use it... [while] others don't know anyone using it," he said of his patients.

Based on anecdotal evidence, Hoffman guesses that about five per cent, or 125 of McGill's 25,000 students, are casually experimenting with Ritalin. He said he has seen only a few cases of extreme addiction, and estimates that about 50 McGill

students may be abusing Ritalin regularly.

Still, McGill officials are quick to point out that Ritalin abuse is not endemic.

"A lot more students are using alcohol than Ritalin," Tellier points out.

He adds that McGill's health centre has not had students come in high on Ritalin. (Students invariably come in at exam time hyped up on caffeine pills and similar stimulants, wondering how to deal with the jitters, fast heartbeat, and other symptoms they produce.)

According to Hoffman and Tellier, students are abusing Ritalin for much the same reason students have always relied on stimulants: stress. The difference now, however, is that students' stress levels are increasing, and they seem to be seeking more potent study aids.

"The number of students we've seen in the past five years has doubled in general," explains Hoffman of McGill's mental health services, which provides counselling and psychiatric services to students.

"There's a high level of stress out there. There's a pressure to do well. The job market is really scary," he said, adding that many students fear that if they don't get straight A's, they won't succeed.

Tellier agrees that Ritalin abuse among students can largely be attributed to a general feeling of pressure to excel academically in order to stake out a claim in the highly competitive job market.

"People are facing pressures that they don't know how to deal with," he said, adding that Ritalin abuse is "a function of what's happening in our society...and the fact that a university education may not guarantee a job."

Hoffman and Tellier also point

out that many students come to them seeking a prescription for Ritalin to help them perform better. They say an increased awareness about the drug and Attention Deficit Disorder lead some students to come looking for a diagnosis and quick-fix to their problems.

But concentration and organizational difficulties, associated with ADD and detrimental to a university career, can also be caused by other factors such as depression and anxiety. According to Tellier, many students aren't willing to confront the real cause of their concentration problems, and so look for a magic pill.

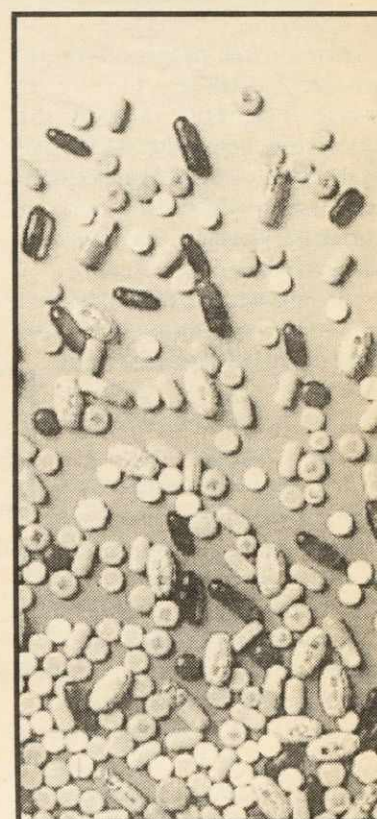
"What we need is an education campaign on how students should deal with stress and prepare for exams long-term. Ritalin is a quick fix," he said.

At the same time, Ritalin may not always work. While students take the drug because they've heard that it's a wonder drug which will kick-in instantly and improve their ability to focus on their studies, many find that it doesn't work that way. For some people, taking Ritalin without a prescription can lead to agitation, depression, or psychotic episodes — impairing, not enhancing, their concentration abilities.

"This is a potentially dangerous drug," Hoffman said.

In the end, experts agree that for most people, the best way to lower anxiety, boost energy, improve concentration and generally do well at school is through exercise, a balanced diet, adequate sleep and relaxation.

While health officials are cautious in their estimation of how many students are actually abusing Ritalin, they do know that there is a general increase in the number of people — including students — taking Ritalin for legitimate reasons



such as ADD.

Health care workers like Joan Wolforth, director of McGill's centre for student's with disabilities, who work with people who have ADD, are concerned that too much focus on the small amount of people who abuse Ritalin will detract from the drug's legitimacy as a beneficial treatment for many people.

According to Wolforth, emphasis on the few students who abuse Ritalin or seek a false ADD diagnosis so they can receive it, "builds up a sense that [the disorder] doesn't exist."

Wolforth said the number of students she deals with who have been diagnosed with ADD and are taking Ritalin has increased "from zero to 20 over the last five years."

For Wolforth, the concern is to prevent reports of abuse from undermining the fact that ADD is a real disorder, one which has only recently begun to be understood.

UVic and their dead bargaining chip

BY PATTI EDGAR

VICTORIA (CUP) — The University of Victoria won't remove a dead tree looming over a logging road until it gets guarantees that an old growth forest it is safeguarding won't be harmed by loggers.

The tree, located on UVic's Jeanne S. Simpson grounds in Lake Cowichan, overhangs a road owned by Timber West Forest Limited. It must be removed before the Worker's Compensation Board will allow the company to begin logging on a nearby property.

Dick Chappell, manager of UVic's support services, said the university won't remove the

dead tree until Timber West promises, in writing, to set up a 40-metre buffer between the Simpson property and Lot 117, Timber West's property.

"We want something in writing and at this moment, they're not prepared to do that"

"All we are concerned about, as facilities management, is the protection of our trust," he said.

The Simpson grounds are 25 acres of old growth forest left in trust to the university 30 years ago by their namesake for ecological and biological research.

"We were given the property to remain as a trust, to be kept in as natural a state as possible, and now the person next door is doing something that could jeopardize that," Chappell added.

Chappell says he fears logging on Lot 117, especially clear cut

logging, could have a number of detrimental effects on the Simpson grounds. A cleared plot next door could result in blown-down trees, temperature and humidity changes, damaged waterways and the introduction of non-native species like broom.

Timber West has not yet made any commitments to the university. And Steve Lormier, a spokesperson for the company, says they don't need to negotiate with UVic because they already plan to meet the requirements they deem necessary for protecting UVic's property.

Lormier says the company will likely selectively log some areas of its lot and clear cut others. Since Lot 117 is private land, it doesn't fall under the regulations of the Forest Practices Code, but Lormier says Timber West will voluntarily leave a buffer on the property line and around stream areas.

"What we're doing certainly

meets code requirements," he said.

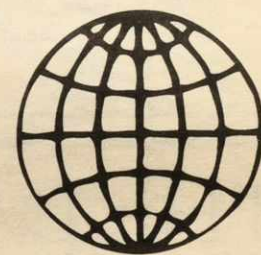
But Chappell says he wants to see a commitment in writing.

"They haven't articulated to us, verbally or in writing, what they plan to do. They have a logging plan report, but it could change tomorrow," Chappell said. "We want something in writing and at this moment, they're not prepared to do that."

UVic may not hold onto its bargaining chip for long, however. If the university doesn't remove the tree, Lormier says Timber West will build a second road, this one far away from the dead tree.

Chappell says a new road is one of his biggest fears.

"They can get around it but its going to cost them money and then they can say to hell with [UVic] and do whatever they want. We're at an impasse and the ball is in their court."



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