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Resurging Heroin Addiction in the Late 1990s

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NOTE: The original 1,000+ page manuscript for *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America* had to be cut by more than half before its first publication in 1998. This is an edited excerpt that was deleted from the original manuscript.

Since it was introduced into medicine in 1898, controlled in 1914, and prohibited even for use in medicine in 1924, heroin has existed within the illicit drug culture as a highly adulterated substance of some 1-5% purity. At such low purity, the drug requires injection in order to maximize its effects and stem withdrawal symptoms. In the mid-1990s, this condition changed with the introduction into the illicit market of heroin that ranged between 40-60+% purity. This high purity allowed the drug to be intranasally ingested--a method that bypassed potential user's fears of needles and fears of HIV infection via needle sharing.

This shift in purity coincided with the spread of heroin to middle and upper class users, and the rise in heroin-related emergency room visits. Most visible among the new breed of heroin users were a

growing number of rock stars, whose deaths brought the drug to the attention of their young fans. The heroin casualties included the suicide death of Curt Cobain of Nirvana and the overdose death of Shannon Moon of Blind Melon, along with a long list of rockers, actors and models who brought heroin to public attention through either their arrest or entrance into various rehab programs. Television specials and magazine cover stories broadcast "Heroin Alerts" beginning in the summer of 1996. Masked behind this new wave of moral panic over heroin use was an increased consumption of prescription opioids that would break into public consciousness in the coming decades through historically unprecedented rates of overdose deaths from opioid use.