# Hmong carry opium habits to their new life in America. US CATCHES ON

By Ann Levin, Special to The Christian Science Monitor | DECEMBER 30, 1987

SAN DIEGO — Last spring United States postal officials here received an unusual letter. It warned them that ``hundreds and hundreds of opium boxes'' were being shipped into California right under their noses. The arrival of the letter coincided with the discovery by drug-sniffing US Customs dogs in Hawaii of opium-stuffed parcels destined for members of the Hmong community here and in other California locations.

Within the last year, such events have alerted health and law-enforcement officials in US cities where Hmong have settled to a new and perplexing drug problem: opium ad diction among these refugees from Indochina.

In the past some of the Hmong, subsistence farmers in the mountains of Laos, grew opium as a cash crop. During the Vietnam war many of the men were recruited by the Central Intelligence Agency to fight the communist North Vietnamese. After US troops pulled out of Southeast Asia in 1975, tens of thousands of Hmong fled to refugee camps on the Thailand side of the Laos-Thailand border. Many made their way to America.

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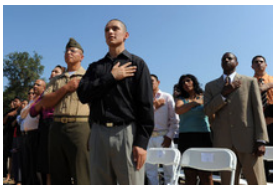
Hmong's image

At a conference on refugee health held in San Diego last year, the number of Hmong resettled in the US was estimated at more than 75,000, with large concentrations in and around the central California city of Fresno and in the St. Paul-Minneapolis area. Approximately 4,000 live in San Diego.

Jon Holmerud, a San Diego County sheriff's deputy, is very sympathetic to the Hmong and concerned about their plight. ``I have an extremely positive image of them,'' he says. Other local law enforcement officers, some of whom fought alongside Hmong soldiers in the Indochinese war, express similar sympathy.

``They came over here as addicts,'' says Deputy Holmerud. ``They're not getting treatment. And this is a group of people that as a whole will help our society.''

A different perspective is offered by Joseph Westermeyer, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Minnesota Hospital and Clinic in Minneapolis. ``It's a serious and growing problem here,'' says Dr. Westermeyer. ``With opium, the average



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About 15,000 Hmong live in the Minneapolis area. Westermeyer has treated more than 100 Hmong opium addicts at the hospital clinic and reviewed reports of opium use in Rhode Island, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Montana, and California. He says, ``The Hmong are trafficking to the Vietnamese and Lao, and the drug is starting to be sold on the street.'' Westermeyer says that some young delinquent Hmong in California are smuggling raw opium from Mexico and sending it to Minnesota.

``Young Hmong who are not making it link up with Hispanic criminals [in the Fresno area],'' he says. ``The Mexican guys go down and bring it up from Mexico, and the Hmong drive it to Minnesota.'' The largest group of Hmong -- about 20,000 -- live in the Fresno area, where county health and law enforcement officials say that opium addiction and trafficking are not major problems.

Tight-knit community

``There is a limited history of opium addiction. What they do in their households we're not familiar with,'' says Nancy Unruh, a public health nurse with Fresno County's refugee health program.

``We haven't had a real big problem with it. They're not a real open community,'' says Fresno Police Sgt. John Retherford of the narcotics division.

Tony Vang, a Hmong who is director of the Lao Family Community of Fresno Inc., says Westermeyer exaggerates the problem because of his experience with addicts he sees in the clinic. Mr. Vang admits that opium is prevalent in the Hmong community, but he says that most families use it for medicinal purposes and only a tiny number are involved in criminal activities like smuggling.

Vang blames federal refugee programs for failing to educate Hmong about what is acceptable in American society. The government has ``the power to go in and try to educate these people, who are simple and innocent. I think they recognize the problem, but I don't think they're interested in helping,'' he says.

Opium addiction among the Hmong was hidden from law enforcement officials in southern California until early this year, though there was at least one arrest of a Hmong for opium smuggling by federal agents several years ago.

Drugs found in the mail

Since February, officers on a San Diego Police Department narcotics task force have staged two dozen phony deliveries (posing as mailmen and arresting whoever accepts the packages of opium). Another dozen set-up deliveries were made in the small community of Banning, near Riverside, Calif.

A dozen parcels, each containing about $25,000 worth of tarry, plastic-wrapped opium resin, sit unclaimed in the downtown San Diego Post Office. US postal inspector Tom Taylor says the Hmong have caught on to the phony delivery scheme. Ripping open a box, he shows the fat spools sown inside oblong neck pillows or hidden in slippers.

``It was something new to us,'' Inspector Taylor says. ``These [the parcels] were coming fast and furious, mostly out of Vientiane, Laos.'' The bulk of the San Diego opium shipments has stopped, says Taylor, but he predicts the crackdown will simply cause the Hmong in Asia to redirect shipments to other Hmong areas in the US.

Opium part of Hmong culture

their money - some of it from welfare checks - to buy drugs instead of food and clothing for the children.

But law enforcement officials are faced with a unique problem. Opium use has been a part of Hmong culture for centuries.



In remote villages of Laos every household kept a chunk of opium to be offered as a courtesy to guests or used as a home remedy for migraine headaches, diarrhea, or bleeding, says Chu Yang, a Hmong leader here.

Opium use is ``part of their culture,'' concedes San Diego Police Sgt. Reggie Frank, who says that he and other officers pulled up 400 brilliantly colored poppy plants - the source of opium -- in a San Diego neighborhood where many Hmong live.

Officials familiar with the problem emphasize that only a small fraction of San Diego's approximately 4,000 Hmong are addicts. There is no evidence, they say, that the Hmong are selling the drug outside their community, further refining it into the more desired drug, heroin, or passing the old-world habit on to their children.

Education vs. enforcement

As a result, the Hmong charged in state court with felony drug possession have by and large been placed on probation or diverted into drug treatment programs.

``As we perceive the problem, we don't look upon this little group as major traffickers. I don't see opium in the schools. The kids aren't picking it up,'' says William Holman, a deputy district attorney in charge of major narcotics prosecutions.

But Mr. Holman's assessment seems optimistic in light of interviews with other officials and people in the Hmong community. Some Hmong point out that it's very difficult for outsiders to find out what goes on inside the Hmong areas. The police officers who have intercepted the opium postal deliveries say that the quantities seized are more than would be required if the opium was just being used for medicinal purposes.

Since there has been little awareness of the extent of the problem, few attempts have been made to rehabilitate users before law enforcement gets involved.

Younger Hmong, accustomed to American ways, blame the older Hmong leaders for failing to educate their followers about US laws or to help them seek out drug detoxification programs.

Traditional Hmong society is divided into clans, and each clan leader wields a great amount of power. That extended family structure persists even in the United States.

Clan chieftains are expected to give unconditional support to their people, always siding with the Hmong against foreigners, says Lang Hergh, a Hmong graduate student in anthropology at San Diego State University.

``You just have to be nice to them and not tell them any bad things - that's the Hmong way,'' Mr. Hergh says.

This cultural idiosyncrasy makes it difficult for social workers and police to reach the people who need help, in addition to the fact that many of the addicts don't

Deputy Hollnerud says the addicts who can't quit should be given prescriptions for methadone, a heroin substitute. But admission into local methadone clinics requires a long history of drug arrests. Most Hmong ``have never gotten so much as a traffic ticket," he says.

Hmong convicted of felony drug possession are subject to deportation for violating US narcotics laws, according to San Diego immigration lawyer Robert Mautino, who is fighting a federal attempt to deport back to Laos a Hmong man who was convicted in federal court of smuggling opium. Sentenced to three years in prison, the man is now on parole.

Robert Moser, a social worker at Catholic Community Services, says the courts should take into account Hmong traditions and develop alternatives to incarceration.

``I'm not asking for special exemptions," Dr. Moser says, ``just a different approach. Throwing a person in jail is not the answer to the underlying problem - education is."

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