

news THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS HEALTH SCIENCE CENTER AT DALLAS

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*****Psychology Division at UT Health
Science Center starts program with
young heavy inhalant abusers.

DALLAS--"Make the World Go Away," a popular Country Western song, is usually associated with the adult world of romance and love affairs. But there is a small group of young people who regularly try "to make the world go away"--in the most deadly way possible.

These youngsters, children for the most part, are heavy inhalant abusers--more commonly called "paint or glue sniffers."

So says Dr. Maurice Korman, chairman of the Division of Psychology, a unit of the Department of Psychiatry, at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas. "This is a way of getting away from something or of being someone or something else just for a little while, the experience of being out of it, for just a moment."

Dr. Korman pointed out that the recent death of three young people in a closed car with a tank of laughing gas on the floor has reawakened the public to the problem of young people and inhalants. "Basically, heavy usage of inhalants is a dangerous habit because of the rapid loss of control that can lead to overdosage and death from suffocation or from various medical complications or from accidents due to impaired judgement." The young child sniffing cement glue from a bag, the psychologist stressed, is in as much danger of dying as the teen with laughing gas.

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first add inhalants

The UT psychologist said the 10-15 year olds are the heaviest abusers. However, older teen-agers are also involved. "It is probably fair to say that some five per cent of the junior and senior high school populations in Dallas are relatively frequent users of inhalants." And, "although there are many anecdotal accounts, little is known about the long-term medical and psychological consequences of heavy usage," he added.

Hopefully, a \$420,000 grant recently awarded to Dr. Korman by Health, Education, and Welfare for a comprehensive research effort on the use of inhalants, such as laughing gas, aerosol sprays and other volatile solvents, will enable the psychologists to find answers about the many unknowns in dealing with these young abusers and their families, who come from all geographical and economic backgrounds. The research team, which is being assembled, will be looking at the pattern of usage, the role that peers and families play and the long-term effect of inhaling.

The grant money will also provide psychological services to heavy abusers in all areas of Dallas. The pilot studies are beginning in West Dallas, an area chosen because it is underserved in the mental health area, according to Dr. Korman, Cooperating with the health science center, in addition to the Dallas County Juvenile Department, is the Los Barrios Community Health Clinic.

Working with Dr. Korman and Dr. Manuel Balbona, co-investigator of the project which began Sept. 1, are Ph.D. candidates in clinical psychology in the center's Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences. Dr. Balbona is a Dallas psychologist who is director of the Adolescent Center at Terrell State Hospital and a member of the center's clinical faculty in psychology.

The psychologists will be working with small groups of eight to ten youths. Instead of traditional psychotherapy, the clinicians will be teaching the youngsters in the groups personal skills involving how to get along with people, how to solve problems in their lives, how to be who they want to be. "Living skills," Dr. Korman calls them.

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"We believe we will find that if these young people are able to live more meaningful lives at school, at home and with their peers, they will not have the same needs to be "out of it," even for a little while. Therefore, a major emphasis of the research will be to evaluate the effectiveness of psychological techniques for changing the drug behavior of the heavy inhalant abusers."

Various techniques will be used with the small groups, such as viewing tapes, experience sharing, role playing and practicing the "living skills" within the safety of the group.

In order to evaluate the work sessions, control groups, which are made up of heavy inhalant abusers who do not get psychological help, will be used. Changes in the pattern of drug usage and changes in family and peer relationships will be examined in both groups.

"The project will also concentrate on the factors that protect some young people from becoming heavy users, even though they are exposed and are a part of a high risk. Some become heavy users but then give it up. We want to look at the strengths of the young people and their families as well as the weaknesses," concluded Dr. Korman.