Drug Usage Starts Early

Baton Rouge, La. (AP) — A study of teen-age drug use says most adolescent addicts take their first drink at age 12 and smoke their first marijuana cigarette six months later.

The study, released Monday, was conducted by Louisiana State University. It involved 250 patients over a one-year period at Baton Rouge General Hospital's Adolescent Chemical Dependency Unit.

The hospital's unit, regarded as one of the best in the country, treats teen-age drug addicts and alcoholics from the Midwest and South and from as far away as Canada.

It claims that 80 percent of those graduating from the six weeks of treatment eventually stay off drugs and alcohol.

"It is by no means definite, but from the one-year study, trends are emerging which confirm things we've suspected all along," said Vern Ridgeway, director of the unit.

The study shows a definite pattern of use. It outlines a classic addict profile, complete with a family history of addiction and specific behavioral problems.

The hospital hopes to continue the study over a five-year period to establish scientific credibility, and Ridgeway said he believes it is "the most comprehensive of its kind ever put out."

Results from a study of two years of patients going through the unit should be ready in a couple of months, he said, and may show that teen-age drug usage is even more widespread than previously thought.

"All that we hear indicates that use is increasing, up to 70 percent in our local high schools today," Ridgeway said. "Drugs are becoming more acceptable and more available."

"If we are going to successfully deal with this, we've got to first have a complete and accurate assessment of what we're facing."

From alcohol and marijuana, the average adolescent addict moves on to inhalants, downers and tranquilizers, speed, PCP, LSD, cocaine, opiates and heroin, the study concludes.

It shows that by age 12, 98 percent of those entering the unit had smoked marijuana and 96 percent had used alcohol. By 16, the study said 16 percent had used opiates and 13 percent shot up heroin.

Another variable was the average times of use per month from a high of 25 times a month for marijuana to a low of three for LSD.

The study shows that more than 90 percent of the adolescent drug users are classified as "being preoccupied with chemicals" meaning that their lives revolve around "getting high."

Other findings from the one-year study included:

- A great majority also admitted lying about their use of drugs and alcohol and most had attempted unsuccessfully to quit.
- More than 90 percent of the patients had experienced accidents, hangover, "burn out," changes in sleep patterns and in ability to work because of their addiction.
- More than 90 percent said they had dropped out of family activities, lost their parents' trust and had family arguments related to their drinking or drug use.
- More than 60 percent had run away from home.
- About two-thirds of the adolescent addicts came from broken homes and about 60 percent were from families in which at least one other member was addicted to drugs or alcohol.
- More than 90 percent said they used drugs at school and sometimes skipped classes to get high.
- Sexual permissiveness related to drug use was recorded by a majority. One-third of the female addicts said they had been pregnant.
- More than 80 percent had experienced thoughts of suicide and 40 percent said they had attempted suicide.