

The 3rd Opium War

April 19, 2011

The  Moscow Times

Can you imagine a state where the main drug dealer also serves as health minister, where a drug that irreversibly damages a person's brain and leads to certain death within two years is sold over the counter in pharmacies, and where any attempt to prohibit the sale of that drug is blocked by the Federal Anti-Monopoly Service?

It may be interesting to study the example of Russia, where desomorphine, commonly known by its street name "crocodile," has become a huge hit among drug users.

Crocodile use has risen threefold in Russia since 2007. According to Yevgeny Roizman, author of "City Without Drugs," about 15 percent of the drug addicts he has met are using crocodile. The Federal Drug Control Service puts the figure closer to 25 percent.

From the first day that addicts start using crocodile, their bodies literally rot away. They are typically covered with horrible sores, have gaps in their mouths where their teeth have fallen out, and the few teeth that remain are yellow and riddled with holes.

What makes crocodile especially attractive is that it is made from codeine-based drugs that can be purchased from any Russian pharmacy without a prescription. The three most

inexpensive and widespread of such drugs are Terpincod, Codelac and Pentalgin. All three are manufactured by Pharmstandard.

That company has a link to Health and Social Development Minister Tatyana Golikova and her husband, Industry and Trade Minister Viktor Khristenko — their son works for Pharmstandard.

Among all the drugs produced by Pharmstandard, those providing the raw materials for crocodile have enjoyed rapidly rising sales in recent years. Strangely, the company never tires of boasting publicly about it either.

In 2007, Pharmstandard proudly listed six of its drugs that were among the country's top 20 best sellers, including Terpincod, Codelac and Pentalgin.

In 2008, the company reported an increase of sales for nondescription drugs of 2 billion rubles (\$70 million), the bulk of which came from sales of Arbidol, Codelac, Pentalgin and Terpincod, according to the company's statement.

Even the world's most successful Russian heroin dealer or organized crime syndicate couldn't earn as much as Pharmstandard pulls in for selling crocodile ingredients.

In fall 2009, the Krasnoyarsk regional legislature tried to make codeine-based drugs available by prescription only. Pharmstandard immediately filed a complaint with the Federal Anti-Monopoly Service, and the attempt to ban the legal trade in raw materials for narcotics was halted in the name of free trade.

The crocodile epidemic could be solved without prescriptions. Just sell only those codeine-based drugs that are more expensive than heroin and stop the production of those that undercut the price of heroin. And for that, Golikova wouldn't even have to make a telephone call. She could probably just talk to her stepson.

This story of the free trade in codeine-based drugs reminds me of the 19th-century opium wars. The one difference with modern Russia, however, is that at least the British and French were selling narcotics to a foreign country.

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