

Actor's death spotlights heroin epidemic

February 4 2014, by Jennie Matthew

The shocking death of Oscar-winning actor Philip Seymour Hoffman from a suspected drugs overdose has spotlighted a growing epidemic of heroin use across the United States, officials warn.

Hoffman, a 46-year-old father of three who was considered one of the finest character actors of his generation, was found lying on his apartment bathroom floor with a needle still stuck in his arm.

Empty and full bags of heroin were found in the apartment and while the autopsy will confirm the precise cause of death, few expect any announcement other than an overdose.

"Heroin is a growing epidemic," US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) spokesman Joseph Moses told AFP.

US heroin-overdose deaths rose by 45 percent from 2006 to 2010, and the amount of heroin seized each year on the Mexican border was up nearly four times from 2008 to 2012, he said.

"First time users are younger than they were years ago and it's not in the cities anymore, it's gone into rural areas, into suburbia," Moses said.

Hoffman is now the second high-profile actor in months whose death has been linked to the class A drug.

Cory Monteith, the 31-year-old Canadian star of hit TV series "Glee", died of an accidental heroin and alcohol overdose in a Vancouver hotel

room last July.

Renewed heroin use comes years after New York quashed its reputation as the heroin capital of the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, and the opiate became something of a taboo.

It was a city where late rocker Lou Reed wrote "Heroin" in the 1960s about the drug that makes you feel "just like Jesus' son."

Indelibly tied to the spread of HIV in the 1980s, use of heroin became a taboo as certain death and for its potent addictiveness.

But the DEA says that is changing, thanks to increased production in Mexico, increased smuggling and users increasingly addicted to prescription opiates then swapping to cheaper heroin.

It was this progression that Hoffman last year confessed to, telling TMZ that he had relapsed back into heroin following a spell on prescription painkillers after having been clean for 20 years.

"Heroin is death. There is no such thing as a good batch of heroin as opposed to a tainted batch," Moses said.

"Unfortunately it takes the death of a very talented actor to bring it home to people... although we've been seeing it (heroin use) go up for years," he added.

The National Survey on Drug Use and Health said last September that the number of Americans who had used heroin in the past year had risen from 373,000 in 2007 to 669,000 in 2012.

The National Institute of Drug Abuse says 4.2 million Americans have tried heroin at least once during their lives, and 23 percent of individuals

who use heroin become dependent.

Police have also impounded more and more caches.

In New York only last week 13 kilos (33 pounds) of heroin worth \$8 million were seized in the Bronx.

Also impounded were hundreds of thousands of glassine bags stamped with brand names such as "NFL" (in a nod to Sunday's Super Bowl football final), "iPhone" or "government shutdown".

Envelopes reportedly found in Hoffman's house were marked "Ace of Spades" and "Ace of Hearts," with New York police now on the hunt for the dealer who sold him the lethal cocktail.

"Heroin is pummeling the northeast, leaving addiction, overdoses and fear in its wake," announced DEA acting special agent in charge James Hunt after the Bronx raid.

Special narcotics prosecutor Bridget Brennan said the seizure should open "everyone's eyes to the magnitude of the heroin problem confronting us.

"We've heard from public officials throughout the Northeast of soaring addiction within their own localities," she said.

New Yorkers aged 45 to 54, Hoffman's age group, are also those experiencing the highest death rate from [heroin](#) poisoning, according to the city's department of health.

The Drug Policy Alliance charity says that of 115,000 people receiving methadone in the United States, 40,000 live in New York.

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Citation: Actor's death spotlights heroin epidemic (2014, February 4) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-02-actor-death-spotlights-heroin-epidemic.html>

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