



Communal life on board ship encourages personal development, confidence and self-respect, which are all key skills for getting life back together

Sailing scheme assists heroin addicts to detox

Two weeks at sea aimed to help four addicts go 'cold turkey'. Eileen Fursland finds out more

Dr Roger Crabtree's GP colleagues had never shared his enthusiasm for yachting but when he announced that he was taking to the ocean with four heroin addicts on a 'cold turkey' yacht trip, they were convinced he had taken leave of his senses.

The trip was the maiden voyage for a Hampshire-based organisation, called Cold Turkey UK, that gives heroin addicts the chance to detox on board a yacht in the Solent.

Groups of up to six addicts spend their first week at sea withdrawing from the drug and the second in activities such as group therapy, escorted sight-seeing trips and learning how

to sail and navigate. They then have an eight-week period of rehabilitation in which they build on their skills and start a new life free from heroin.

Dual role

Dr Crabtree, a GP in Bishops Lydeard, in Somerset, owns a classic yacht and is a qualified off-shore yachtmaster.

This made him ideal for the Cold Turkey project serving as honorary medical officer as well as a skipper.

Dr Crabtree works half-time in the rural practice and plans to arrange his working week so that he can fit in many more trips in future following the initial trip in May.

'I have very understanding partners,' he says.

Cold Turkey is a not-for-profit company set up by yachtsmen Dave Savage and Paul Dean. Dr Crabtree heard about it through Primary Care Mental Health and Education (PRiMHE) chairman Dr Chris Manning, who has also been involved in designing the programme.

Mr Savage and Dr Crabtree were accompanied on the yacht by another crew member and a nurse who monitored the addicts' physical condition.

Counsellors came on board to provide the addicts with one-to-one counselling four times a week.

Dr Crabtree spent a lot of time talking with the addicts and was impressed by their determination to kick their heroin addiction.

'I was struck by the courage of these people who were feeling absolutely dreadful,' he says. 'They were looking like death and probably feeling the same but nevertheless, with a lot of warmth and support from Dave and the others, were able to come on deck and start to be part of the team on the boat.'

'I expected them to be much more wimpish, I suppose, but they weren't saying "I don't like it" or "it's too cold". They just kept quiet and carried on and you could slowly see their personalities reappearing behind their eyes, which was an extraordinary experience. When they left you felt that something had really been achieved.'

'Coming off heroin is very uncomfortable but it is not dangerous. The risks really come with dual diagnosis and we screen those people out during our selection process.'

Mixed results

'Of the four people we had on board, for two it was extremely successful. The other two did not finish but it was actually because they had more problems than they had owned up to. We are developing the protocols for our selection process in the light of our experience.'

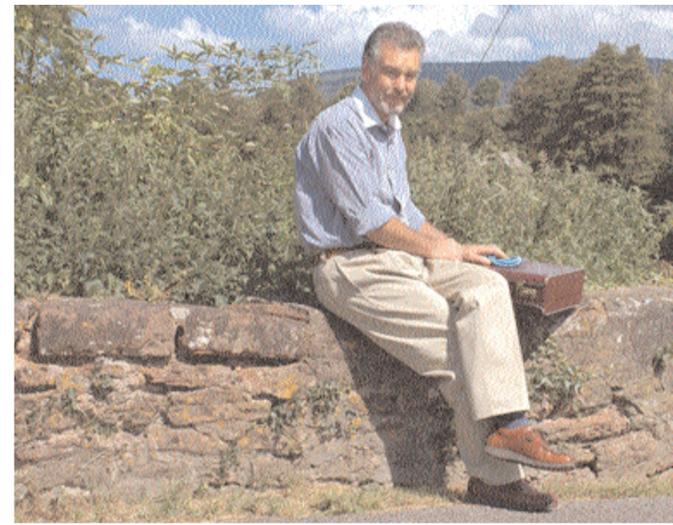
Dr Crabtree's role on the boat was simply to be available in case of any medical emergencies and any normal illnesses and accidents. He also skippered the 72-foot ketch and introduced the clients to the joys of sailing.

He believes the initiative will prove an effective treatment for heroin addiction. 'The environment on a sailing yacht is spectacularly successful for personal development, confidence and self-respect,' he says. 'These are the very things that these people need to get their life back together once they have managed to kick the habit.'

Developing teamwork is an essential part of the experience. 'Being at sea is demanding, it's a little dangerous, often, and you have to work together with other people and rely on them,' says Dr Crabtree. 'There seems to be something about that relationship between shipmates which does make a big difference to people.'

'The boat itself has a great feeling of security but the accommodation is relatively Spartan — there are no showers and there are four people to a cabin, so it's not like being on a cruise liner.'

'It was hard work because it was 24/7 but the Solent is a nice



Dr Roger Crabtree: 'Something about the relationship between shipmates makes a big difference to people'

They were looking like death and probably feeling the same but, with support, were able to start to be part of the team

place, it's a lovely boat, there is always plenty to talk about, we could watch DVDs and listen to music.

'Dave Savage managed to create an outstandingly positive atmosphere. He is a very charismatic man and he has a real way of engaging with individuals and making them feel supported.'

Ongoing challenge

So far three trips have gone out in the past year, with a total of 14 addicts.

The detox is the easy part — the challenge, of course, comes with helping the addicts to stay clean, so the rehabilitation programme is crucial.

After the initial two weeks at sea, the clients spend a further four weeks training to become on-board crew and

learning skills such as radio and boat repair, as well as undergoing counselling and working on life skills.

They then should be competent enough to do a four-week work placement as a crew member with a charter company or in a marina.

One recovering addict has been employed by RADAR, a charity also run by Mr Savage. RADAR provides boat charters and sailing training, and raises funds for those who cannot afford the £7,750 cost of treatment.

Cold Turkey aims to become recognised as part of the local provision for drug addiction so that treatment can be provided on the NHS.

'It's early days but we have the confidence to move ahead with it now,' says Dr Crabtree.

Cold Turkey UK

- Cold Turkey can run its programme from any marina.
- It can now take self-detoxed cocaine/crack addicts on its 10-week educational rehabilitation programme.
- For more details, visit www.coldturkey.uk.com, email coldturkey.uk@ntlworld.com, or call (02392) 513 330.