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The Pocket Guide to Drugs and Health, By Darke, Shane, Lappin, Julia, and Farrell, Michael, United Kingdom

Citation for published version:

Robertson, R 2022, 'The Pocket Guide to Drugs and Health, By Darke, Shane, Lappin, Julia, and Farrell, Michael, United Kingdom: Silverback Publishing, 2021, ISBN: 9781912141180', *Addiction*, vol. 117, no. 7, pp. 2124-2125. <https://doi.org/10.1111/add.15810>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1111/add.15810](https://doi.org/10.1111/add.15810)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Addiction

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Addiction

The Pocket Guide to Drugs and Health by Shane Darke, Julia Lappin, and Michael Farrell

United Kingdom: Silverback Publishing, 2021 ISBN: 9781912141180

Drug problems are notorious for being complicated and opaque, with information sources contaminated by political, commercial and personal interpretations. This book will be popular with those who like clear, brief, confident facts presented by authors who, obviously, know what they are talking about.

Having found the authors' previous publication, *The Clinician's Guide to Illicit Drugs and Health*, a great source to refer to, I'm delighted to find in this "pocket guide" the inclusion of sections on psychoactive drugs, alcohol, nicotine and tobacco and hypnotosedatives. The changes since 2019 make it clear, if that were needed, that the topic is a moving target and new information is likely to be emerging year by year.

Many of the summary statements resonate and will stick in the memory to be used again and again. The fact that the lifetime prevalence of hallucinogen use is in the order of 10-15% (but that dependence rates are low), that around 5% of current drinkers qualify for a diagnosis of alcohol use disorder (AUD), 15-20% are drinking at a hazardous rate, the global seroprevalence rate of hepatitis C is about 52% in people who inject drugs and many other gems all can be stored in the memory of the reader.

The risk with brevity is always missing important facts or issues, but the authors by and large carry it off. With any summary text it is easy to try to identify omissions or to suggest inclusions and favourite issues. One example of over simplification is in the DSM criteria for the diagnosis of substance use disorder where 2 (or 3) criteria are diagnostic. This is a fact but the additional information that the presence of 4-5 criteria is considered moderate and 6+ severe SUD is important.

Chapter one is a masterful introduction to the basic facts about individual groups of substances and is a useful combination of simple and more scientific information including insights into genetics and pharmacokinetics. There is a nice balance of acute effects and the less familiar (I had to look up psychotomimesis). My surprise at the inclusion of fentanyl in the section on novel psychoactive substances (and opiates) is explained later in chapter seven.

The acute effects of the substances are included but we have to wait for the chronic ones, which appear in the relevant chapters.

The chapter on alcohol is, not surprisingly, large in outlining alcohol's range of actions and damaging effects. A useful reminder up front is that alcohol is a highly prominent risk factor for suicide. The treatment of alcohol dependence in chapter

eleven is similarly useful. Rare complications can't all be included but one of my early clinical learning experiences was a case of beriberi caused by thiamine deficiency in a chronic drinker.

At a time when debate continues about the risks and potential benefits of cannabis, to be reminded that "about 10% of users will develop dependence" is something that clinicians need to know when interpreting the symptoms and signs described. The four fold increase in deaths due to motor vehicle accidents while intoxicated, the 5 fold increase in suicide risk and the 2-3 times elevated risk of ischaemic stroke are key facts to bear in mind as legal controls are lessened.

The next chapters are full of insights and key facts. Although the rates of serious complications are low with hallucinogens, the spectres of sudden cardiac death, overdose in association with other drugs, and stroke and accidental injury are ever present.

Some observers might have included that benzodiazepines cause cognitive loss or even dementia but I agree with the authors that the evidence is not supportive at present. I particularly liked the information that smoking cessation by the age of 40 years cuts the years of life lost by 90%. This is incredibly useful information to pass on to patients, as is the statement that "half of smokers who have quit at 12 weeks will relapse within 12 months and multiple quit attempts are likely."

The inclusion of an excellent categorisation of novel psychoactive substances and their effects and side effects is a valuable resource for students and experienced clinicians who have probably all struggled with the moving target of emerging substances and their adverse effects. There is a feeling of unfinished business about this chapter but the authors have done us a great service by explaining the current state of play.

The chapter on injecting drug use is a treat. Like many clinicians I see this as the clinical issue driving most serious problems and a behaviour that should demand the most attention and focus of early interventions. The seventeen pages devoted to this are, in my view, a critically important inclusion.

Perhaps wisely, judgements about relative success rates for various treatment modalities are guarded and generally restricted to descriptions of the nature of the intervention. Anything more might lead to an unnecessarily prolonged debate on the complicated area of short, long term benefits and the difficulties associated with defining successful outcomes.

The presentation of absence of evidence is another useful feature. The reservation about the long term effects of vaping, the absence of adequate conclusive evidence of safety of most drugs during pregnancy and risks to the neonate and the difficulty of assessing long term damage for some groups of drugs serve to make us careful about absolute judgements. Long term morbidity due to alcohol and tobacco are more extensively presented and a lingering possibility remains that longer term

damage by other drugs may become clear as results from longer term studies are made available. Indeed one of the take home messages from this book is the reminder that, at least in some countries, the greatest morbidity and mortality over a lifetime is caused by alcohol and tobacco use. The peak use of drugs such as cannabis is stated to be in the third decade of life and one might assume that other drug groups are similar, reminding us that many people use drugs with little long term harmful consequences.

The appendix with links to resources is satisfyingly to the point and leads to the most quotable sources.

This book is an excellent resource. Its accessibility and concise and accurate information will make it popular with the modular learning courses and the mainstream.

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