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Former drug user is now helping others kick habit

When Tom Tomkinson started smoking opium in the Merchant Navy as a 16-year-old boy, he had no idea that it would lead to a 35-year heroin addiction. But now, having kicked the habit, he is able to use his experience to give advice and support to other users.

SAM EMANUEL reports.

A city drug user whose 35-year-long heroin addiction almost killed him has turned his life around and is now helping other addicts to kick the habit and avoid the dangers it poses.

Tom Tomkinson, 57, began smoking opium while in the Merchant Navy at the age of 16, but this soon led to a heroin addiction, which consumed his own life.

But now he has used his experience to help other substance abusers, and volunteers for several drug treatment providers in the city, educating trainee doctors about how to help drug users, and talking to prisoners about how to avoid the potentially lethal virus.

Mr Tomkinson, whose habit saw him turn to a life of crime, resulting in years in prison, said: "I used to inject into my arms, legs and feet, it was 24/7. It was relentless, I was on half a gramme a day plus methadone, which is quite a lot. You just don't have any days off - it is there with you and you have got to have it.

"I had started buying opium in the Navy because you could buy it so cheaply around the world. I had never even heard of the word heroin. I didn't associate opium with heroin then, I just used it like cannabis.

"When I came out the Navy I realised I had a problem because I hadn't got any, and then I fell in with the local drugs scene and started injecting.

"Then the doctor who we got our methadone from took us off his books and a big spate of chemist robberies followed, which I was involved with. I got three years in prison for that."

But when a close friend, who was also a serious substance abuser, almost died from septicaemia and found the strength to stop taking drugs as a result, Mr Tomkinson, who lives in Brook Place in Norwich, got the wake up call he so



Volunteering role: Tom Tomkinson, a former heroin addict, who was addicted for 35 years, is now passing on his experiences to other addicts to help them kick the habit. PHOTO: SIMON FINLAY

desperately needed.

He said: "I was still on heroin at the time but my friend said 'I can be strong enough not to bother with it, why don't you give it a try?'"

"I had a few false starts because the hardest part about giving up is staying off. I was left with a big

void in my life and had to find something to fill it, and so I fell in love with gardens around the city and got involved with gardening projects, which helped me stay off."

Mr Tomkinson now has mobility problems and has had two knee replacements, which he

blames on the effect of the heroin on his bones. But despite this difficulty, he has stayed off drugs and now dedicates his life to helping people to prevent and deal with the problems caused by drug addiction.

He said: "You are not going to stop people taking drugs. Nothing makes you give up, only you can do that, and you have to want to. So it's about harm reduction. I go around prisons and teach them about the dangers of sharing needles."

Mr Tomkinson works with trainee doctors to teach them about substance abuse, and what sort of questions they should ask when treating a patient with a drug addiction.

He said: "They don't really know what to ask, for example whether to ask people whether they are drinking as well as taking drugs, because if you are doing both it is a lot worse, so I guide them."

And he has started a Hepatitis C support group for people going through the same long and arduous journey to rid themselves of the virus which he had to embark on once he had kicked the habit. It involves chemotherapy-like treatment which caused hair loss and severe depression.

He now volunteers for the Norwich Drug and Alcohol Action Team (DAAT), the Trust Alcohol and Drugs Service (TADS) and the NORCAS service as an expert by experience and service developer.

Daniel Harry, partnership liaison officer at DAAT, said that people like Mr Tomkinson were vital in the treatment of drug addicts. He said: "The experience that service users bring to the table plays an important part in shaping how drug and alcohol treatment services are delivered in Norfolk."

"We have established a Service User Group, which will enable service users to play a greater role in the future. We also consult with service users as part of our planning processes and on key strategies as they are developed."

→ Have you turned your life around to do something positive? Call Evening News reporter Sam Emanuel on 01603 772438 or email sam.emmanuel@archant.co.uk



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A £250 party at Café Rouge

If you're looking for a festive get-together to remember this year, let Café Rouge in Norwich add a little French fancy to your celebrations. Whether partying with friends, family or colleagues, there's something irresistible on the new Christmas menu for everyone.

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→ The winner will be selected at random by our judges

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→ Prize cannot be exchanged for cash

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