

## A day in Mexico City – September 2014

I was walking down the street looking for a taxi. In Mexico City it seemed there were either no taxis or every car was a taxi. Tonight there were no taxis and I was going to be late for Maria's dinner party. Maria had been a friend for years and she knew that I wanted to meet some Mexican doctors – she promised me that there'd be at least five at the dinner. It started to rain for the third or fourth time but I couldn't stop thinking about the day and how precisely I'd witnessed the true absurdity of international drug policies.

That morning in September 2014 I'd got up earlier than usual and went to the little place where I'd taken morning coffee for the ten days I'd been here this trip. The tension seemed even thicker today – since the news about the 43 students had come to light there was a real atmosphere that something must be done to change – it had really pulled everyone together. References to murder sprayed on walls – could the police have really colluded with gangsters and slaughtered these young people – it seemed that nobody was disputing it.



Poster of the 43 students

I finished my coffee and set off to Tepito, the famous outdoor market. I'd been told that along with all forms of contraband one could buy any amount of cocaine, cannabis and any other drugs you could want. I was particularly interested to see if opium or heroin was available – considering the amount produced each year mainly in Sinaloa



Tepito Market

Of course one had to find a way in to the right place but this was something I knew I was good at from earlier times. I arrived at about 10.00 and wandered around trying to project that look of confidence but without affiliation to any form of law enforcement. I passed by a stall with an eclectic selection of old books and magazines and saw an old copy of High Times.

I picked it up and started skimming the pages. “¿Quieres comprarlo?” said the guy behind the stall. “Si” I said, trying to smile in a way that said yes but what I really want is to buy some good cocaine. He understood - as within what seemed less than two minutes I was following another guy at a very fast walk through the crowded market. “Go with him” and I was following another and then another. Was I being drawn in just to have my wallet removed? – it didn’t feel that way and suddenly the latest guy I was following ducked into a gap in a wall about 2 feet high – easy for him but at my height quite a challenge.

I stood up in a tiny room made of corrugated iron and my sense of smell found strong cannabis and that unmistakable aroma of large quantities of high quality cocaine. “I am a busy man – what do you want” said one of the guys. I said “a little coke to start with” I took a pinch and rubbed it into the back of my hand seeing it disappear into the skin confirming the obvious good quality. “Can I have five grams.” By now I’d seen the plethora of different drugs that were in that tiny room. Bin liners full of top quality marijuana, big zip lock bags full of cocaine, jars of MDMA tablets of all different colours, shiny methamphetamine, every type of benzo – boxes of Rohypnol caught my eye, barbiturates, steroids and some pharmaceuticals that even I didn’t recognise.

“That’s fifty dollars” he said. I pulled out some cash and handed over fifty and asked “do you have any opium or heroin” – he replied “we never get it here” – “it’s all exported to USA.” I could feel it was time for me to go but still asked “what about morphine or some Oxycodone or even Vicodin?” His tone was getting a bit fed up and he replied “I have the best cocaine, MDMA, marijuana and anything you can find in a pharmacy in Mexico and you ask me about drugs that you can get at home.” I apologised and explained that I was just curious why in a country that grows a lot of opium and makes it into heroin that it is so hard to find.



Mexican tar heroin

Trying to change the subject I said, “I’ll take a box of those Rohypnol.” He reached over and put one into my hand and smiled at his colleague – “that’s another \$50.” I gave him the money and was escorted out – within a minute I would not have been able to find the place again.

I took one taxi to a tourist spot and had a beer – then another taxi home. The day had passed by so fast – in the interest of science I contemplated trying a Rohypnol to see if they were real but instead I snapped one in half and it broke in that way only the real ones do. I took a little nap, waking at 7.30, and looked longingly at the obviously excellent cocaine. I was soon showered, shaved and dressed for dinner.

Finally, a taxi arrived and I was on my way to Maria's lovely house. I was a little late but others would be later. The dinner was wonderful and people were talking about so many interesting things – I found myself happy just to listen to this group of mainly doctors talking about politics and it wasn't long before drugs were centre stage. Outrage and sadness about the 43 students were expressed in abundance.

I was here at dinner partly on a mission and suddenly I asked, "many of you are doctors – I have terrible pain in my back and I need some strong painkillers" "can one of you write me a prescription for a strong opioid?" The room was silent for a minute and one replied "some tramadol perhaps." Then it happened – this very charismatic man looked at me and said "back pain – let me tell you a story." He looked quite angry – not with me – just angry. "One month ago – I tried an experiment. I am a senior psychiatrist and my prescription pad is supposed to be of the highest level in Mexico. I wrote ten prescriptions each one for a single dose of oral morphine for an elderly patient with end stage cancer. I asked ten of my students to dress up smartly and I gave each of them one prescription and told them each to take a different area of the city and try and get a pharmacy to dispense. Six hours later they came back having visited 307 pharmacies and only 9 of them had dispensed. The excuses had many but it was clear that the number of forms that needed to be sent to different departments and the fear if one was not completed properly made the pharmacists feel it best just not to dispense at all." He said, "Right now while we eat dinner there must be thousands of people in the city suffering in agony – we have an awful situation that must be changed"

I lay in bed that night wondering if the international law makers had any idea of what was going on in the real world.

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*This is a story not a report but it is pretty accurate portrayal of events that took place that day in September. I had been fascinated that even though cocaine and marijuana, as well as many pharmaceutical drugs were readily available – opioids from both the illicit market and through the medical system were almost impossible to find. It is my understanding that since then much work has taken place in Mexico to improve access to opioids for pain relief particularly in the area of palliative care. I am told that there are still some training needs - as there always is when systems change. IDHDP has opened discussions with a senior oncologist to see how maybe it could assist.*

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