

The word 'opium' is derived from the Greek word for juice of a plant. Opium is prepared from the juice of the seeds of *Papaver somniferum*. The milky fluid is highly narcotic after drying.

Excavations of neolithic settlements in Switzerland dating back to 3200 BC have found evidence of cultivation of the opium poppy :it is thought that it may have been grown for its food value as the seeds contain 45% oil.

Papaver was grown in lower Mesopotamia, as far back as 3400 BC. The Sumerians called it *Hu / Gil*

, the 'joy plant.' Around 1300 BC, the Egyptians began to grow opium thebaicum and the opium trade flourished in the eras of Kings such as Tutankhamen.

By 460 BC, Hippocrates, the 'father of medicine' extolled the usefulness of opium as a narcotic and styptic in treating internal diseases, diseases of women and epidemics.

In the 1300s, opium disappeared from European history as the Church decreed anything of Eastern origin to be the work of the devil.

In 1527, Paracelsus re-introduced it as 'laudanum' pills known as 'Stones of Immortality'. These black pills comprised opium thebaicum, citrus juice and quintessence of gold and were used as painkillers.

By the nineteenth century, the various substances contained in opium were isolated.

In 1806, Friedrich Serturmer extracted one of these substances in its pure form: he named it **morphine**

after Morpheus, the Greek god of sleep.

Codeine

(Robiquet, 1832) and papaverine (Merck, 1848) followed.

In 1874, English researcher, C.R. Wright first synthesized **heroin**, by boiling morphine over a stove.

Opiates became widely prescribed for a variety of conditions. In 1880, H.H. Kane published a textbook listing some 54 diseases that could be treated with opiates, ranging from neuralgia to nymphomania! In fact, opium and morphine were held in such high regard that they became known as G.O.M. "God's Own Medicine."

In the early twentieth century, legislation was set up by various countries to control trade and to make possession of certain substances by unauthorised persons illegal.

Thus the basis of the criminalisation of the use of drugs was formalised.

The 1912 International Opium Convention obliged participating countries to control opium trade. The convention was handed over to the League of Nations in 1920 for enforcement. In England the Dangerous Drugs Act came into force in the same year.

Whilst in America, heroin was outlawed for medical purposes, in England, this use was upheld and even provision of heroin addicts with opiates was a permitted and acceptable practice.