

# The New York Times

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## A Disease, Not a Crime

By MICK SUSSMAN

### CLEAN

#### Overcoming Addiction and Ending America's Greatest Tragedy

By David Sheff

374 pp. An Eamon Dolan Book/Houghton Mifflin

Harcourt. \$25.

It must be the purest agony to be the parent of a child succumbing to drug addiction. David Sheff's previous book was an account of his son Nic's descent from a thoughtful boy to a sullen pothead to a self-destructive methamphetamine fiend, and of his own tormented and bewildered reaction.

If that book, "Beautiful Boy," was a cry of despair, "Clean" is intended as an objective, if still

impassioned, examination of the research on prevention and treatment — a guide for those affected by addiction but also a manifesto aimed at clinical professionals and policy makers. Sheff's premise is that "addiction isn't a criminal problem, but a health problem," and that the rigor of medicine is the antidote to the irrational responses, familial and social, that addiction tends to set off.

Sheff, a journalist, writes that America's "stigmatization of drug users" has backfired, hindering progress in curbing addiction. The war on drugs, he says bluntly, "has failed." After 40 years and an "unconscionable" expense that he estimates at a trillion dollars, there are 20 million addicts in America (including alcoholics), and "more drugs, more kinds of drugs, and more toxic drugs used at younger ages."

Sheff says that drug addiction is a disease as defined by Stedman's Medical Dictionary, since it causes "anatomic alterations" to the brain that result in "cognitive deficits" and other symptoms. But isn't drug use an act of free will, distinguishing addiction from other diseases? Sheff responds that behavioral choices contribute to many illnesses: think of unhealthy diets and diabetes.

Like other diseases, addiction has a substantial genetic component. Like obesity, illness and poverty are major risk factors. These susceptibiliti

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