In common with other countries of South America, Colombia is currently experiencing an impressive rise in the use of psychoactive substances. But in the last few years, one of these substances has taken first place on the market: "Basuco," a by-product of cocaine processing. This paper presents an overview of the situation, describing the state and private services offered to users, research results, clinical data about symptoms of intoxication and withdrawal, the consequences of chronic use, and a brief evaluation of two institutions working on different kinds of treatment. The need for more systematic and integrated research is stressed as otherwise some of the fundamental decisions in this field will be simply new versions of old mistakes.

INTRODUCTION

On March 11, 1947, a law was passed in Colombia which officially prohibited the cultivation, distribution, sale, and possession of coca leaves. However, in different parts of the country, the peasants maintained their habit of chewing these leaves ("mambeo"), and the authorities did not see the need to take action, as this use was very restricted and had little social importance.

In the 1970's, cocaine use started rising in privileged classes, but during the entire decade, its social importance was minimal. Until 1980, Colombia was merely a platform for trafficking, but due to overproduction and increased international controls, the traffickers began dealing inside the country. This change in the situation was further complicated by other developments such as:

1. The production of a local bush with low cocaine content, the Erythroxylum novogranatense tipica (0.6% cocaine), which grows at altitudes between 500 and 1500 metres.

2. The deterioration of the country's socio-economic conditions.

3. The increase in unemployment (20% for young people) and the lack of opportunities to improve living conditions.
4. The moral deterioration brought about by the "marijuana boom," which brought great amounts of currency into the country, and developed a parallel economy easily accepted by the authorities.

5. The prestige and power obtained by traffickers such as Carlos Lehder and Pablo Escobar, who appeared as "saviours" to the poor.

6. The connection between drug traffickers and some guerrilla groups, which today is undeniable.

All of these circumstances as well as others, paved the way for the "basuco explosion." The word "basuco" comes from the word "base" - of cocaine - and also refers to a weapon, the bazooka. Basuco was very inexpensive which made it accessible to the majority of the population. Indeed, the first addicts were peasants on the payroll of the cocaine producers.

**Basuco Production**

There are two methods which are generally used to produce basuco. In the first method, coca leaves are treated with gasoline, lime, alcohol, ammonia, potassium permanganate and sulphuric acid. A very impure cocaine sulphate is obtained in this method. The second method, rarely used because of its great cost, involves mixing the residue from the process of refining cocaine with a purer paste to which methaqualone or rivotril (an anti-convulsant) is then added.

Basuco contains 40% to 80% cocaine sulphate, and about 10% to 15% pure cocaine, although these amounts may vary a great deal.

**Patterns of Use**

In Columbia there seems to be no discrimination in the use of basuco by social class. However, the more expensive cocaine hydrochloride powder is generally used by artists, industrialists, and executives, who usually snort the powder and alternate its use with alcohol. Injection or smoking cocaine is rarely found in this group.

Basuco is smoked, usually after being mixed with tobacco, or in some cases with marijuana (making a "diablito") or methaqualone. Its use is also combined with alcohol. In most cases, the dealers will mix the coca paste (basuco) with talcum powder, brick dust, and many other different types of residues.

General characteristics of the pattern of basuco use include:

1. 80% of users smoke basuco only on the weekends.
2. The addicts smoke from three times a week to every day.
3. All users smoke several cigarettes each time from 5 to 200, perhaps even more.
4. The package of basuco costs between US$3 and $6 and contains from \( \frac{1}{2} \) to 1 gramme of basuco; with this amount, 4 to 10 cigarettes may be made.
5. Most of the time, basuco, as well as cocaine, is used simultaneously or alternatively with alcohol. Because of exhaustion, insomnia, and severe anxiety, users frequently take other drugs, such as diazepines, and barbiturates.

There are a considerable number of articles that carefully describe the entire process of absorption and elimination of cocaine and its by-products (Jeri, et al., 1978; Siegel, 1979; Paly, et al., 1982) and all of these processes apply to basuco. The absorption rate of smoking basuco, about 20 seconds, is quicker that that of snorting cocaine hydrochloride.