

## **'Either we could continue to ignore what is happening like everyone else in the addiction field and therefore indirectly support practices where individuals, especially women and children, are tortured and even killed, or we could tackle this head-on.'**

**C**asting out evil spirits is not something that most families opt for when a relative is addicted to drugs or alcohol. But that's what Mo's family (name changed) thought he needed. Mo, a 30-year-old man from Ealing, was a heroin addict and his parents believed that evil spirits, or jinn as they are known in the Muslim community, were the source of his drug addiction.

For them, the only cure was to seek religious help. They sent their son to a Muslim cleric called Maulana Ilyas Qadri, who ran a drug rehabilitation centre in Pakistan.

Qadri was known in Asian communities in London and the Midlands because he had distributed leaflets with titles like 'War against drug abuses'. The leaflets claimed that 'a patient once admitted will never use drugs again' and 'not a single doze [sic] of medicine is given. Addicts of heroin, opium and hashish from all over the world are treated here spiritually through Quranic verses.' However, the 'treatment' involved being chained up, beaten and starved in order to drive the spirits out of Mo's body.

It sounds like a tale from the Middle Ages. Yet it illustrates the lengths some families will go to when they believe that a person's addiction to drugs is caused by them being possessed by spirits.

Mo's case came to light in 2006, when police in Pakistan raided and shut down Qadri's premises, releasing more than 100 men who were held together with a 220 feet chain. Southall based charity Drug and Alcohol Action Programme (DAAP) played a key role in highlighting the case.

The link between the belief in spirit possession and addiction hit the headlines recently when Amy Winehouse was quoted as blaming her drug addiction on Satan. And according to media reports, she asked faith healer Peter Hippolyte, whom she met while recording on the Caribbean island of St Lucia, to help her.

'The use of spiritual methods to tackle addiction is not uncommon,' says DAAP chief executive officer Perminder Dhillon. 'In addition to cases like Mo's, we have dealt with several others over the past five years which show just how far desperate families will go, often paying huge amounts of money for dubious cures. Yet, worryingly, the addiction field seems to be oblivious of this issue.'

'One recent case involved a woman who seemed to have multiple personalities,' Dhillon continues. 'According to her father, she misused illegal and prescription drugs when she was young and hadn't left home for 26 years. The family spent thousands of pounds trying to find a spiritual cure, often being taken for a ride by charlatans.'

'Another case we dealt with involved a cannabis and alcohol user who complained of hearing voices telling him that he was someone else. He said that when he heard this particular voice, he seemed to have a complete transformation of personality. His way of dealing with it involved surrounding himself with close family members who did not leave his side until the voices stopped.'

The belief that a person's addiction to drugs and alcohol is caused by a spirit taking over their body is a common one within many communities including the UK's minority ethnic communities.

Dhillon says her concern is that people who need professional help are being exploited by so called healers.

'In the past, communities in the Indian sub-continent for example would often consult what was termed a 'wise person' when families faced such situations. The wise men or women used their wisdom and experience to provide family advice and support. Unfortunately families now approach people who do this as a business, which is very lucrative. Something like £150 is a minimum just for a few prayers to be offered. Often very complex rituals are used, which certainly don't do anything to help a person's addiction.'

Last month, more than 60 service users and their families joined addiction professionals for a seminar in Southall, west London, organised by DAAP called *Can addiction lead to possession or can possession lead to addiction?* to explore the issue.

'For us the choice was simple,' says Dhillon, explaining the reason behind the seminar. 'Either we could continue to ignore what is happening like everyone else in the addiction field and therefore indirectly support practices where individuals, especially women and children, are tortured and even killed, or we could tackle this head-on and create awareness and needed discussion.'

The keynote speaker was medium John Devereux who has carried out rescue work for more than 50 years, which involves using his experience as a spiritualist minister to 'drive out the spirits that are possessing an individual'.

He supports Dhillon's assertion that the belief in spirit possession isn't exclusive to minority communities.

'I've dealt with a number of possession cases which have involved addiction to alcohol, illegal or prescription drugs,' he says. 'Many young people, after smoking cannabis at a party or having a few drinks with friends will get out a ouija board for a laugh. Some may experiment with holding a séance after watching television programmes like *Most haunted*.'

'Soon after they've complained of hearing voices or in worst case scenarios find themselves completely entranced, unaware of their surroundings for long periods of time. The biggest problem is that many of the people I come across will admit to being an alcoholic or drug misuser but very few will admit to being possessed by a spirit for the simple reason that they're frightened of being locked up, laughed at or mistreated. Although some people might describe what I do as 'exorcism', it's not a term that we use anymore because of the negative connotations promoted in the media and in big budget movies.'

Devereux admits there may be scepticism from some about the existence of spirits, but points to the work of respected academics like Professor Gary Schwartz of the University of Arizona, an expert on parapsychology and who in his book *The afterlife experiments: breakthrough evidence of life after death* described a series of scientific experiments which used mediums to investigate and prove the existence of spirits and an afterlife.

'Spirit possession involves behaviours that you wouldn't normally associate with everyday anxieties,' he says. 'We're talking about sudden mood changes, blank expressions, extreme agitation and or aggression, the appearance of listening to something or someone which can't be seen, speaking in a language they've never spoken before, unusual speech inflections and people hearing voices telling them to act in ways that are out of character.'

There was a lively discussion during the seminar about the widespread belief in spirit possession in Asian and other cultures. One woman brought along her son whom she felt was possessed.

Addiction professionals also shared their experiences. A counsellor told how he didn't know what to do when clients he supports tell him that they are hearing voices.

A nurse shared her experience of caring for a very ill woman who firmly believes she is possessed. She said she was torn between what her medical training told her to do and what she herself witnessed when she was with this woman.

After the seminar a number of counsellors present asked Devereux to come back and do an intensive workshop with them on how to best help clients who believe they are possessed. And since the event, DAAP has been contacted by several people who believe that spirit possession is playing a part in their own or a family member's addiction.

'It is vitally important that we hear people's experiences rather than dismiss them,' says Dhillon. 'We have to signpost them to safe and recognised ways of dealing with this phenomenon. The Spiritualist Movement in the UK has built up

very good experience in this field and we must learn from them. At the same time, I categorically condemn any practice that seeks to torture, harm and even kill people in the name of rescue work. That is why we have teamed up with the charity Stepping Stones to seek government support to ban such practices.'

The use of alternative therapies including spiritual healing is something that has been taken more seriously by health practitioners in recent years.

In June last year, mental health professionals gathered in London for a conference called *Spirit possession and mental health* organised by campaign group Ethnic Health Initiative.

Melba Wilson of the National Mental Health Development Unit believes it is vital for the substance misuse field to be open to new ideas.

'One issue over the years has been that people with mental health problems who also have substance misuse issues often get lost between the two services,' she says.

'In the mental health field, there's some recognition of the impact of belief systems on service users. However, if addiction professionals and spiritual healers are to work together, there needs to be a balance between people's needs being met in ways that are useful to them and adequate guidelines, but these two things need not be polar opposites. Professionals can learn from the spiritual community and vice versa. Faith healers can also learn about mental health and addiction issues and begin to adapt some of the ways in which they work.'

Dhillon agrees. 'We hope this begins an important debate in the substance misuse field, one which will help us better understand and support the needs of clients who believe they are possessed and prevent their exploitation.'

For further information about the issues raised during the seminar, visit the website [www.daap.org.uk](http://www.daap.org.uk) or call DAAP on 0208 843 0945



**Driving out evil spirits to rid a person of their addiction sounds like a tale from the Middle Ages. But as Vic Motune reports, it's happening in the UK and needs to be tackled**

# FACING THE SPIRITS