

# The road to sobriety

## Out of the Box

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**ONE OF MY** duties as a Justice of the Peace is to visit prisons and rehabilitation and disciplinary centers. The mission of our visits is to inspect the facilities and listen to issues or complaints from the inhabitants.

In February, I visited the Shek Kwu Chau Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre, managed by the Society for the Aid and Rehabilitation of Drug Abusers, or SARDA. The visit reminded me that our society and science still have a long way to go to help the people in need and get them back on their feet.

All visits must be carried out by two JPs and my companion this time was Wong Kuen-fai, who is also commissioner of the Inland Revenue Department.

Together, we took a government helicopter from Bauhinia Plaza at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre. The ride took only 15 minutes, but the scenery was breathtaking. Sometimes, we simply forget that our cityscape is among the world's most striking, especially on a clear and sunny winter's day.

Many have probably never set foot on Shek Kwu Chau. Indeed, the island was uninhabited until the 1960s, when SARDA applied to the government to use it. Since then, a minimum network of roads and about a dozen buildings have been built – including a hospital, pier and heliport. As a restricted area, a permit is required to visit the island, and only helicopters can get to it in emergencies.



We were warmly received by Patrick Wu. The superintendent of the center explained to us in detail the origin, mission and operation of the facilities.

Unlike other drug rehabilitation centers, SARDA has only voluntary admission. All inpatients on the island joined voluntarily and are free to leave at any time – everything is free of charge. Their rehabilitation program normally consists of one week of a graduated reduction of a drug substitute (for heroin addicts, the treatment is methadone), followed by two weeks of recuperation, but the recovery period may last up to six months.

I was curious about the science behind addiction. It turns out this field of science is not very developed.

It's not very well understood how humans become addicted, what chemical and neurological changes take place in the brain and body. What we know is that over time, the brain develops a tolerance and adapts in a way that makes the substance or activity less pleasurable, so the addict will have to take an even heavier dose to achieve the same effect.

The backgrounds of the inpatients have been changing over the past decades too. As Wu said, in the old days, most were working class and from the lower rung of society, and often they got addicted due to stress and crisis in their life (we were shown some arts and crafts created by the inpatients from those days, and many of them were quite nice). Today, many are not economically deprived, but get hooked because they are looking for excitement in their life and the drugs allow them (temporarily) to do that.

SARDA itself is agnostic, but it does recognize that religious belief can help in tackling addiction; we saw a cluster of chapels, temples and even a temple for Guan Yu scattered throughout the island. It assigns duties to inpatients: cooking, laundry, gardening, painting, as well as metalwork and woodwork.

Even though Hong Kong is well developed in many respects, it is not exempt from many of the social problems that plague modern society, and drug addiction is just one of them. Lives and families can be ruined in an instant if we make the wrong choice.

The unaffected should feel lucky that we are spared these problems, but it does not remove our social responsibility to try to contribute to solve the problem as a whole. NGOs like SARDA are doing their part to provide support and rehabilitation services to those in need and deserve applause from our society; but a scientific solution cannot come soon enough.