



Selected Papers of William L. White

www.williamwhitepapers.com

Collected papers, interviews, video presentations, photos, and archival documents on the history of addiction treatment and recovery in America.

Citation: White, W. (2014). Early inhalant intoxication. Posted at www.williamwhitepapers.com.

Early Inhalant Intoxication

William L. White

Emeritus Senior Research Consultant
Chestnut Health Systems
bwhite@chestnut.org

NOTE: The original 1,000+ page manuscript for *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America* had to be cut by more than half before its first publication in 1998. This is an edited excerpt that was deleted from the original manuscript.

The practice of inhaling drugs dates to antiquity. Inhalation also played its part in American history, as evidenced by the practice of inhaling vapors such as chloroform and ether for purposes of intoxication. The earliest reference to the recreational inhalation of volatile solvents that the author has located is Lewin's 1931 account of a German who became addicted to sniffing benzene--a substance he first encountered through his occupation as a bandage maker. Lewin also noted reports of children inhaling gasoline vapor in order to become intoxicated (Lewin, 1931, p. 203-204).

The first American report of solvent inhalation for purposes of intoxication appeared in 1951, in a report by Clinger and Johnson of two young boys who purposely inhaled gasoline fumes to become intoxicated. The first youthful craze of solvent intoxication (glue-sniffing) as a social phenomenon didn't begin until the late 1950s. More widespread use of solvent inhalation unfolded in the 1960s as part of a broader pattern of drug experimentation.

One of the common causes of early deaths from solvent intoxication resulted from the user sniffing a solvent from a bag or a saturated cloth, passing out, falling forward face down into the bag or rag, and then suffocated. An 1848 report in *Lancet* described the death of a druggist's apprentice. While he was growing intoxicated, the apprentice fell face down into a chloroform-saturated towel (Nagle, 1968). Reports of similar suffocation deaths of adolescent and pre-adolescent children began in the 1960s.

References

Clinger, O. & Johnson, N. (1951). Purposeful inhalation of gasoline vapors. *Psychiatric Quarterly*, 25, 557-567.

Lewin, L. (1931). *Phantastica: Narcotic and stimulating drugs, their use and abuse*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Nagle, D. (1968). Anesthetic addiction and drunkenness: A contemporary and historical review. *International Journal of the Addictions*, 3, 23-39.