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# Addiction: Not just brain malfunction

Data in Nature · March 2014

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## Letter to the Editor of Nature

We write to express our concern about your recent editorial (Nature, 506:5). Our focus is not on the animal rights matters discussed but on the view of addiction being promoted: that addiction is a disease. Furthermore, we challenge the claim that this view is not particularly controversial among scientists.

Your editorial asserts that framing addiction as a social, as opposed to a medical, problem is akin to denying people hope that their loved ones 'might one day be helped with the terrible burden of this disease'. In the one-dimensional view endorsed in the editorial, substance use is divorced from its social, political, legal and environmental contexts, and is seen primarily or exclusively as a consequence of brain malfunction. This myopic perspective minimizes the enormous impact of people's life chances, choices and circumstances on addictive behaviors. In short, substance users are reduced to little more than mind-free victims of a brain disease. This position also trivializes the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors not only of current addicts but also of those individuals who have overcome dependence in various ways. It also belittles the significant impact public health campaigns and legislations are exerting on curbing harmful substance use. As a result of these efforts, for example, there are now more ex-smokers than current smokers in many countries.

The research battle against addiction is too complex and multifaceted to be fought on one front alone. A sole reliance on the disease model of addiction can do more harm than good when combating the complex multitude of problems associated with harmful substance use. A variety of approaches at diverse levels of analysis are required to address this issue, and policy-makers must consider all of the evidence. Furthermore, the view we espouse is hardly a minority one, and many recent texts place neuroscience as only one important component in a multi-layered system of influences that involves psychological, social, and cultural elements. Hence, the scientifically supported conceptualization of 'addiction' as a biopsychosocial phenomenon should not be cavalierly disregarded and replaced by simplistic conceptualizations that target only one level of analysis.

## References

Editorial: Animal Farm. Nature, 506, 5 (06 February 2014) doi:10.1038/506005a

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