

COVER ESSAY

## “Nicotine Monkey on the Back”

The illustration on the cover of this issue of the journal is entitled “Nicotine Monkey on the Back”.<sup>\*</sup> It is a reproduction of an acrylic-on-board painting by Don Ivan Punchatz. A 16 × 11.75 inch (40.6 × 29.8 cm) print of the painting is available for purchase from HEALTH EDCO in Waco, Texas, USA.

Punchatz is an artist whose works have appeared, according to HEALTH EDCO, “on the covers of, or in features in, every major magazine from Time to Playboy”. His artwork has graced the cover of Time on three occasions, and is included in the permanent collections of the Dallas Museum and the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York.

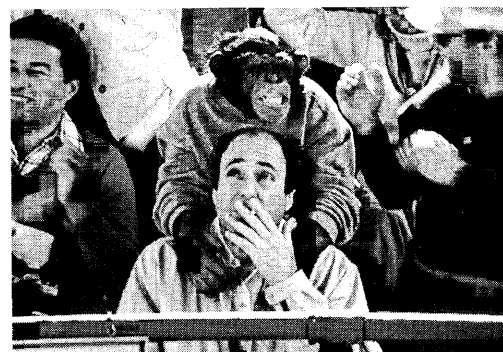
HEALTH EDCO describes “Nicotine Monkey on the Back” as “one of Punchatz’s most devilishly delightful works. The purpose is not to make fun of smokers; they are the victims of the most deceiving and clever advertising campaigns ever waged. Rather, Punchatz whips with the flick of his brush, the tobacco companies and their advertising agencies who have helped promote one of the most damaging addictions known to man.”

The print (No 12360) can be ordered for US\$19.95 from HEALTH EDCO, 5045 Franklin Avenue, PO Box 21207, Waco, Texas 76702-1207, USA. Tel +1 800 433-2677 (extension 91) (or +1 817 776-6461), Fax +1 817 751-0221. Please note that the background colour of the painting has been modified in the reproduction on this issue’s cover to better match the green tone used on the covers of volume 4.

We have asked two addiction experts to comment on the derivation of the term “monkey on the back”. Their contributions appear below. — ED

To say that someone has a “monkey on his back” is widely understood to mean that he has an addiction that must be satisfied. In a publication this year from the US Office of National Drug Control Policy, *Street terms: drugs and the drug trade*, the word “Monkey” is simply defined as “drug dependency”. Interestingly, given the subject of the cover illustration, a secondary meaning is given as “cigarette made from coca paste and tobacco.” In 1973 the *Narcotic officer’s handbook* states that “monkey” means “drug habit with physical dependence.” There seems no doubt about its current meaning, but where did the term originate and when?

If we consult *Partridge’s Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, we find that in the first edition (1936) this meaning regarding drugs is absent. “To take the monkey off one’s



A television public service announcement produced by the US Office on Smoking and Health in the 1980s featured a message about getting the “monkey off your back”.

back” is a phrase dated 1887 and means to calm oneself. “To get one’s monkey up” is to make or become angry and “to have a monkey on one’s back” also means to be angry. This latter phrase, dating from about the middle of the last century, is said to be obsolete.

Only in the later supplements to Partridge’s dictionary do we find the definition with which we are familiar. According to the seventh edition (1970), the phrase “to have a monkey on one’s back” was in use in the United States by 1945 and means “to be ridden by the drug habit.”

Finally, turning to the *supplement* (1976) to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the earlier meaning, to be angry, is now obsolete and replaced by the meaning familiar to us. The earliest citation is from a thesaurus of American slang (1942), which states that to “have a Chinaman or monkey on one’s back” is to manifest withdrawal distress. A quotation from Nelson Algren’s *Man with a Golden Arm* (1949) suggests that the “monkey” is not only the distress, it is also the extent of the addition:

“Then I got forty grains ’n went up to the room ’n went from monkey to nothin’ in twenny-eight days ’n that’s nine-ten years ago ’n the monkey’s dead.”

From these sources it appears that the earlier meaning, to become angry or agitated, was transferred to the constant potential for withdrawal distress that the opiate addict had to keep always in mind. It was a burden and a cause of agitation. To apply the phrase to someone who cannot stop smoking, but would like to, is appropriate. The cover illustration is an example of such an extension, although I suspect the artist was also influenced by the flying monkeys in the movie *The Wizard of Oz*.

Tracing back everyday phrases is interesting, but it is difficult to be definitive. It seems likely that the phrase antedates the

<sup>\*</sup>©Don Ivan Punchatz and WRS Group, Inc., Waco, Texas, USA.

1940s and I would invite anyone with earlier or different citations to send them to *Tobacco Control*.

DAVID F MUSTO  
Yale University School of Medicine  
P.O. Box 207900  
New Haven, Connecticut 06520-7900, USA

\* \* \*

On the phrase “to have a monkey on one’s back”, I have done a small amount of sleuthing in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and in a couple of drug slang glossaries, and can offer the following.

In addition to its literal meaning, “monkey” has had a variety of figurative meanings in English. In the 19th century, the word was used for a container for liquor, a earthenware jar for water, and a bricklayer’s hod, all of

which might be carried on one’s back. As early as 1797, British seamen and others talked of “sucking the monkey”, meaning drinking rum from a cask, bottle, or coconut shell. “Monkey” was used as an indication of a recurrently demanding burden in the early 20th century phrase referring to a house mortgage, “to have a monkey on the house”.

In the late 19th century, “to have a monkey on one’s back” was recorded as a phrase used without reference to drugs, meaning to be out of temper. By the 1930s, the phrase is well established in American drug argot to refer to an opiate habit or withdrawal symptoms.

ROBIN ROOM  
Addiction Research Foundation  
33 Russell Street  
Toronto, Ontario  
Canada M5S 2S1

#### Note to readers

We hereby solicit your ideas and contributions for future covers of *Tobacco Control*. Like previous covers, we would like future covers to be colourful and creative – with a tobacco control theme. Original artwork, anti-tobacco posters, photographs, and cartoons may all be considered. Material with an international flavour would be particularly desirable. A cover essay will generally appear in each issue to provide appropriate background information and commentary on the cover.

Please send ideas and submissions (original or high quality, camera-ready photographs) to the editor at the address on the inside front cover. – ED