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DRUG addiction is a choice. It sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? Isn't addiction an uncontrollable affliction, a disease in need of medical treatment?

Not according to Jeffrey Schaler, an American psychologist and professor and the author of *Addiction is a Choice*.

Schaler argues that chronic drug use has been scapegoated as an addiction, a physical or mental illness, much like homosexuality was once believed to be.

While he admits drugs such as heroin can have profound physiological effects when users withdraw, he maintains that the act of using a drug is actually a choice, and people do it for a reason.

For Schaler, the question is: "Does that [drug-induced] physiological change make you do what you're doing, or do you choose to do that?" And much like reaching for a cigarette, he concludes that drug-taking is a volitional act.

Medical implications aside, to me Schaler's argument makes perfect sense. Mainly because it allows me to reconcile the remnants of anger I still feel at the selfish yuppie smackie I lived with not so long ago, and the pity I have always felt for hard-core heroin users who have few choices available to them.

A self-described recreational user, Lucy's "recreation" involved running up hundreds of dollars of rental and utilities arrears so she could continue to enjoy four-star restaurants, five-star designer clothes and "the lifestyle I'm used to" while continuing to nick my hairdryer to warm veins in her feet (the only good ones left) to bang herself up after late-night visits to her dealer in Sydney's Kings Cross.

Lucy had a father willing and able to pay for her to detox in a suitable five-star establishment but the closest she got to a serious consideration of the issue was flipping through "heroin chic" magazine articles for an outfit to impress her boyfriend (also a user).

Schaler says people such as Lucy should be held responsible for the harm they do to others, and should not be excused because they were using drugs at the time.

At the other end of the scale is Kara, a street kid and addict my mate John has befriended through his work in a Sydney refuge for addicted homeless youth. Kara, 16, a budding entrepreneur who set up a luxury hotel door-to-door marijuana dealership to support her habit, could conceivably have negotiated the AOL-Time Warner merger using the skills she has honed in managing a scrum of snotty street kids and their snooty clients. But Kara is illiterate, homeless, and a victim of sexual abuse. She can't read bus signs, let alone a business curriculum. There is no one willing to pay for her to go through detox -- sometimes there is no one willing to pay for Kara to eat.

According to Schaler, drug-taking is a choice people engage in for a plethora of reasons. Spoilt for choice, Lucy uses drugs in a way that is selfish because she exploits, hurts and steals from the people around her. Kara's habit is a product of the lack of choices available to her. Schaler says we should teach people to control their addiction by giving them the opportunity to make a conscious choice to change their behaviour.

While I have serious reservations about some of the medical evidence on which he bases his argument, Schaler's book at least takes the spotlight off the politicians and law enforcement crusaders and casts it squarely on the disparity in choices available to users throughout society.