

ALCOHOLISM... 'Most Neglected' Problem

Headlines tell of LSD hallucinations who leap from buildings. Reports decry the heroin-induced deaths of 12-year-olds. Suburbia becomes painfully aware of the increasing use of marijuana by its young people. And in the U.S., some \$508 million is spent yearly for amphetamines, tranquilizers and sedatives.

Meanwhile—as the public is preoccupied with such drugs—the abuse of a very ancient depressant drug, alcohol, is largely unchallenged and ignored. Yet it is a dependency-inducing drug whose misuse has created what the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) labeled "a public health problem of major importance."

The NIMH report was referring to alcoholism, and called it the nation's "most neglected and most misunderstood" health problem.

Mark Keller, editor of the Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol, has defined alcoholism as "a psychogenic dependence

or a physiological addiction to ethanol (alcohol), manifested by the inability of the alcoholic consistently to control either the start of drinking or its termination."

Estimates of the number of alcoholics in the U.S. are among the most challenged of statistics but many authorities agree with the plausibility of Keller's carefully qualified estimate of about 4 million to 5 million alcoholics, or about 4 per cent of the total adult population.

Alcoholism—though of epidemic proportions—is but one phase of the total span of problems of excessive drinking.

For example, alcohol was involved in nearly half of the 55,220 traffic fatalities in 1968, according to the National Safety Council.

An FBI report reveals that in a given year slightly less than a third, or 1,535,000, of the reported arrests in the U.S. were for public drunkenness, in-

addition to more than 250,000 for drunken driving.

And, in terms of absenteeism, inefficiency, replacements, resulting from excessive use of alcohol, U.S. industry suffers "a \$2 billion hangover," according to the National Council on Alcoholism.

If to all this is added the destructive effects of alcoholism behavior on family life, we are confronted with complex problems of staggering dimensions. And the constant, invariable factor is misuse and abuse of the chemical, alcohol.

Authorities and agencies, including church-directed groups, all agree that only overall, concerted, realistic measures aimed at long-range prevention can be effective in the eventual amelioration of these problems.

The very latest addition to the growing fund of information that derives from real-life situations, and not isolated laboratory experiments, is a massive study, published in Janu-

ary, entitled, "American Drinking Practices."

The 260-page report is a national survey of drinking behavior and attitudes, conducted in late 1964 and early 1965 by Dr. Don Cahalan, Dr. Ira H. Cisin and Miss Helen M. Crossley of George Washington University.

Published by the Rutgers Center on Alcohol Studies, the survey was based on 2,746 personal interviews with a random sample of adults living in households. It is considered to be the most representative and reliable body of data about users of alcohol beverages that has yet appeared.

The portrait of the American drinker that emerges from this painstaking statistical and analytical study shows that 68 per cent of all American adults—77 per cent of the men and 60 per cent of the women—drink at least occasionally.

More specifically, the country

as a whole can be divided into five groups of people with reference to the use of alcohol:

Abstainers, who reported drinking less than once a year or not at all, were 32 per cent of the sample.

Infrequent drinkers were those who drink at least once a year, but less than once a month, and consisted of 15 per cent of the sample.

Light drinkers, drink small quantities at least once a month and made up 28 per cent.

Moderate drinkers made up 13 per cent of the group and were those who drink at least once a month, or as much as a drink or two a day.

Heavy drinkers, amounting to 12 per cent, were those who consume five, or six drinks a day or at least once a week.

Thus, the report concludes, "In the U.S. as a whole, drinking is typical behavior; both abstinence and heavy

drinking (especially for escape from life's problems) are atypical."

The Rutgers study clearly demonstrates that those who drink for "escape" reasons, and, in addition, come from a milieu of sub-culture where heavy drinking is prevalent, are most likely to become problem drinkers or alcoholics.

"Escape drinkers" are those who drink for such reasons as: "A drink helps to cheer me up when I'm in a bad mood." "I drink because it helps me to relax." "A drink helps me to forget my worries." "I drink when I want to forget everything."

When such drinkers have learned to drink heavily, the report says, "they show an especially high incidence of problems related to drinking."

It is not necessarily heavy drinking as such, but heavy drinking coupled with non-socially-oriented reasons for drinking which is most likely to lead to drinking problems."

All these findings lend further substance to the proposals put forth in 1967 by the Cooperative Commission on the Study of Alcoholism in "Alcohol Problems, A Report to the Nation."

In this respect, it would appear that certain religious bodies have to be on the alert. The 1970 Rutgers report shows that Catholics had above-average proportions both of drinkers (83%) and heavy drinkers (19%). In fact "Catholic men had the highest proportion of heavy drinkers among any of the religious groupings (33%)."

On the other hand, those who belonged to the more conservative Protestant denominations "had relatively high proportions of abstainers (48%) and relatively few heavy drinkers (7%)."

As for church attendance, "twice as high a proportion of those who said they never went to church (22%) were heavy drinkers as those who said they went every week (10%)."

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