

Teenage Drinkers: Our Future Alcoholics?

What's Known So Far

Last of a series
BY SHARON DARNIEDER

Like a childhood disease, the illness known as alcoholism can begin young. Sometimes it gets its start when most people begin drinking — in their teens.

Now that's not saying every teen who takes a drink is going to become a teenage alcoholic or grow up to be an older one.

"With some people the first drink they take shows they're alcoholics," said Dr. Ruth P. Oakley, director of the John L. Norris Clinic for Alcoholism at Rochester State Hospital.

"Alcoholism is lack of control over drink," she added. "You activate certain mechanisms with it and then your thinking is only for the second drink, and so on."

What is it that causes certain people to become alcoholics while others who drink heavily or frequently are not?

"I like to call it the X factor," said Dr. Oakley, "because we don't know."

"In some people it breaks down quickly and in others it takes time. And, of course," she added, "there are those whose mechanism never breaks and they don't become alcoholics even if they do drink."

She noted that alcoholism, as a progressive disease, continues to worsen with time, "even if you don't drink all the time."

And she cited the case of a woman who drank socially all her life and never had any problems stopping. But suddenly, in her 70s, she became an alcoholic and sought help at the clinic.

Because of the lack of answers to the question of alcoholism, it continues to be a complex illness, baffling both victims and those who try to help them.

But whether it strikes when someone is 15 or 50 it has the same devastating results.

"A few years back the phrase 'generation gap' was used a lot," said William W. Dugan, director of the Alcoholism Information and Counseling Center.

"There is no such phrase for an alcoholic," he continued. "Whether you're unable to attend classes or work is the same thing. There is complete identity between the young and old because alcoholic drinking is alcoholic drinking."

Average AA Age Down to 30s

Proof of the increase in younger alcoholics in past years comes from an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) member who wished to remain unidentified.

"When I first came to AA I was 23," he said. "Everyone else was old and I remember thinking how out of place I felt. When I came back at 30 many were my age and there were some who were even younger."

He noted that the average age for alcoholics in AA in the past had been "in the 50s, but now it's in the 30s. There's no question today that we're getting them younger than we used to," he added.

If more teens heeded warning signs when they drank, perhaps they could save themselves and their present and future families years of misery, according to the professionals.

The brochure put out by the Alcoholism Information and Counseling Center states that every problem drinker adversely affects an



Photo by Susan McKinney

average of four other persons in his family and more than 16 friends and business associates.

Dr. Oakley pointed out that "any teen who drinks in a solitary fashion" should beware.

"Most teens need the right association for a drink," she added, "like being at a party or with a group of friends where everyone else is taking a drink."

Dugan looks for blackouts, or temporary amnesia which he describes as an "early warning sign" and a change in the person's drinking pattern.

He added that he didn't think most teens drank every day, but said "many have lost weekends. They don't remember anything from Friday night to Sunday and I don't call that social drinking."

Dugan is concerned about the number of teens who overdrink and thinks they should be educated about the dangers of alcohol through the schools. Guidance counselors "should be the number one source," he said.

Alcoholism Is Not Found in the Bottle

He added that programs brought into schools by outside agencies are good "but they're a one shot deal. There should be posters, literature and brochures on alcohol and its dangers available all the time."

He scoffs at those who say alcoholism isn't an illness.

"If it was in the bottle we would have many more alcoholics than we have because most people drink," he concluded. "I believe it's in the system and not in what you drink."

Like others, he's concerned about the number of teens who have a drinking problem and don't seek help.

He was pleased when a Drinker's Quiz, which ran last July in the Times-Union, brought in about six teens to the center for help.

"They seldom come in themselves," he said, "so we were pleased they responded to the quiz."

Another way the center and other agencies help teens with alcohol problems is through worried parents who call or court referrals.

Another possibility why teens don't seek help was voiced by Father Enrique T. Rueda, director of the Drug and Alcohol Council.

"Most people who are at that age (in their teens) don't perceive they have a problem," he

said. "Alcoholism is a disease that takes time to develop."

Those who provide alcohol education and treatment for teens say they're concerned about society's permissiveness regarding the drug.

"Although there is no hard data to support it," said Kathleen Scheg, alcoholism planner for the Genesee Regional Health Planning Council, "one thing I keep hearing over and over across the region from everyone dealing with teens is that they see dope leveling off and alcohol increasing among teens."

(The council is currently engaged with the State Department of Mental Hygiene, Division of Alcoholism, in a study of alcoholism treatment and planning for the 10-county Genesee region.)

Is the recent increase in drinking teens the result of the stiffer state drug laws?

"I don't think so," said Dugan. "As far as I'm concerned we've always had a drinking problem in young kids. The drug thing just overwhelmed it for a while."

Father Rueda pointed out that he attended city concerts attracting young people and observed that "there's much more drinking going on at them than smoking grass."

A recent report entitled "Alcohol Abuse and the Criminal Justice System," put out by the Genesee/Finger Lakes Regional Planning Board, calls society's treatment of alcohol as essentially a non-drug a "major problem" and terms it the nation's "number one drug problem."

The study points out that public education on alcohol should stress the recognition of alcohol as a potentially dangerous drug.

In information attributed to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, the study states that alcohol is "conspicuously excluded from the nationwide publicity and extreme legal sanctions dealing with the drug problem."

Alcohol: 'No. 1 Drug Problem'

"I think teen drinking is a problem because alcohol is so widely accepted," said Raymond A. Selke, director of the National Council on Alcoholism, a chapter of the Health Association of Rochester and Monroe County.

"This is apparent in the relief of many parents to find out that their child is only drunk and not on drugs," he added.

The parent who thinks like this is making a big mistake, according to the experts.