

NEWSWORTHY TRENDS

Newsworthy Trends

NIH Launches National Study On Alcoholism

(NAPSA)—“I was an active alcoholic from the late 1960s until the early 1980s,” says Ann Howard, a 53-year-old journalist. “I lost much of all that was important to me—a marriage, jobs, family and social relationships, health and economic security. When I finally faced the fact that I might be an alcoholic, I looked for proven treatments and found none—only a collection of detoxification, education, and mutual-help programs. Some of them I tried and, after three relapses across as many years, I eventually achieved sobriety. Now 20 years sober, I still do not know what worked for me, when, or how—or if something else might have worked better and faster to prevent huge personal losses.”

To determine the most effective current treatments for alcoholism, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), part of the National Institutes of Health, has launched COMBINE, a study designed to evaluate various combinations of counseling and medications. COMBINE began in March 2001 at eleven universities across the country.

To date, there is no “magic bullet” cure for alcoholism, a disease characterized by impaired control over drinking, tolerance (increased drinking to achieve a desired effect), physical dependence, and, often, severe craving following sustained abstinence. More than four percent of U.S. adults (eight million people) are diagnosable with alcoholism (alcohol dependence) and about 13 percent experience the disease at some time during their lives. Like hypertension, cancer and many other diseases, alcoholism is characterized by relapse.

About 13 percent of Americans will experience alcoholism at some time during their lives.



More than 50 percent report that one or more of their close relatives has a drinking problem.



Ten percent of people in need of treatment for alcoholism actually receives it.



Of persons who receive treatment, as many as 50 percent relapse at least once within one year of treatment.



A government study will define the best available treatments for alcoholism.

“As many as one-half of persons who receive treatment relapse at least once and only a minority achieve long-term remission of disease,” according to NIAAA Director Enoch Gordis, M.D. “But we know now that several specific treatments can help to reduce drinking and sustain abstinence.”

“COMBINE is based on two decades of research in which NIAAA has thoroughly tested existing treatments and worked to develop new ones,” said Richard K. Fuller, M.D., Director of NIAAA’s Division of Clinical and Prevention Research. “In 1996, Project MATCH, another groundbreaking national study, demonstrated the effectiveness of two professionally delivered behav-

ioral treatments and professionally guided mutual-help involvement. The behavioral treatments to be used in COMBINE are based in that knowledge.”

Also during the past decade, research on medications to treat alcoholism has rapidly expanded. In 1994, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved naltrexone, which interferes with the rewarding effects of alcohol and reduces the likelihood of relapse to heavy drinking. A second medication, acamprosate, is currently under review by the FDA. Acamprosate appears to help prevent drinking by relieving the discomfort of alcohol withdrawal.

“From our growing knowledge of the brain mechanisms involved in alcoholism, the search continues for optimal treatments,” said Dr. Gordis. “In the meantime, it is critical that we define and apply the best current treatments.”

The eleven sites are recruiting 1,375 people 18 years and older to participate in the study. Participants will be screened for alcoholism and those who meet study criteria will receive either counseling or a combination of counseling and one or more medications or a placebo. “We expect that the behavioral therapies and medications being tested in COMBINE will complement and perhaps enhance one another,” said Dr. Gordis.

The study will be underway for more than two years, with results to be reported in about four years. To find the nearest study site, call 1-866-80-STUDY, Monday to Friday, 8:00 AM to 6:00 PM (EST). People interested in the study can also call 301-443-3860 or visit www.niaaa.nih.gov.