

American Medical Association Honored with Milestone Big Book

Honoring a relationship that has sustained itself over the course of many decades, Alcoholics Anonymous recently presented the 30-millionth copy of the Big Book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, to the American Medical Association at A.A.'s 75th Anniversary International Convention in San Antonio, Texas, on Sunday, July 4th, 2010.

"The AMA has long recognized alcoholism as a disease requiring adequate treatment," said the Very Reverend Ward Ewing, D.D., chairperson of A.A.'s General Service Board, "and this has helped A.A. erase stereotypes and spread the message of sobriety and fellowship."

Since its publication in 1939, *Alcoholics Anonymous* has pointed the way to a life of comfortable sobriety for thousands of suffering alcoholics who otherwise might not have found help, offering convincing evidence to relatives and friends that compulsive drinkers can recover; and sharing insights for physicians, psychologists, members of the clergy and other professionals who work with alcoholics.

Accepting the honor on behalf of the AMA, immediate-past chair of the AMA Board of Trustees Rebecca Patchin, M.D., noted, "The AMA is honored to be recognized for the work we do to help address alcohol abuse. A.A. has been able to touch and improve the lives of people around the world and has led the fight against this destructive disease."

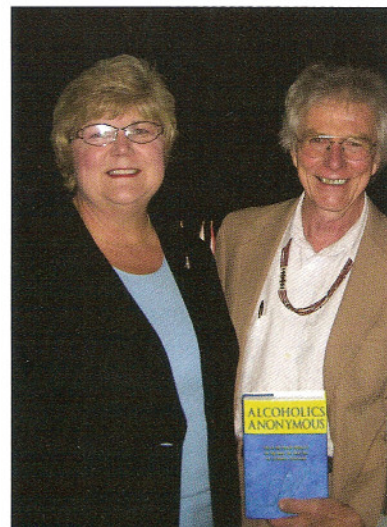
Individually, throughout A.A.'s history, many in the healing profession have provided medical knowledge and support as A.A. grew in its ability to help the suffering alcoholic. Dr. Silkworth's contribution in articulating alcoholism as an allergy to alcohol coupled with an obsession to drink helped to set Bill W. on the road to recovery. Sister Ignatia, the frail nurse at St. Thomas Hospital in Akron, ministered to literally thousands of drunks as they sobered up on the alcoholic ward in that city. Dr. E.M. Jellinek was instrumental in organizing the Yale School for Alcohol Studies, out of which evolved the National Council on Alcoholism, today known as the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, which brought national attention to the realities of alcoholism as a medical, not a moral, problem. And, of course, there was Dr. Bob, A.A.'s beloved cofounder who, along with Sister Ignatia, treated, encouraged and counseled innumerable alcoholics in his pioneering time.

Yet, as a body, there were few organizations in the medical realm that were willing to address alcoholism head-on in the early years of A.A.'s existence. From a medical standpoint, alcoholism—and alcoholics—meant nothing but trouble. Emotionally, physically, spiritually and medically problematic, alcoholics often wore out their welcome with the hospitals and professionals who tried to help them.

The AMA's Council on Mental Health, however, in a 1956 "Resolution on Hospitalization for Patients with

Alcoholism" from its Committee on Alcoholism, tried to redress the negative association many physicians and hospitals had toward alcoholics:

"One of the most consistent complaints of physicians who wish to care for these patients is that many hospitals will not admit such patients with a diagnosis of alcoholism. Many feel that these people are intractable, uncooperative, and difficult to handle. Because of their untoward behavior, hospital authorities feel that they are not equipped to take care of the medical treatment of such overactive patients. Where such patients are unruly and uncooperative, this attitude is understandable. However, for many of these sick people who



Bill Clark, M.D., former Class A (nonalcoholic) trustee, presented the 30-millionth copy of *Alcoholics Anonymous* to Rebecca Patchin, M.D.

express a wish to be treated in a general hospital, it has generally been found that cooperation is forthcoming and that no special attention or equipment is necessary for treating these patients. Hospitals should be urged to consider admission of such patients with a diagnosis of alcoholism based upon the condition of the individual patient rather than a general objection to all such patients. Such objections have been very frustrating for physicians who wish to treat these patients and often discourages them from taking a greater interest in alcoholics."

Going further, the Council's Committee on Alcoholism requested that the AMA's Council on Mental Health urge hospital administrators and staffs "to look upon alcoholism as a medical problem and to admit patients who are alcoholics to their hospitals for treatment." The committee also stated that "chronic alcoholism should not be considered as an illness which bars admission to a hospital, but rather as a qualification for admission.... The chronic alcoholic in an acute phase can be, and often is, a medical emergency."

This resolution on hospitalization was ultimately passed unanimously in 1956 by the AMA House of Delegates, which represented a tremendous victory, as the largest medical organization in the world now recognized alcoholism as an illness warranting admission to general hospitals.

In a time when alcoholism was referred to, even by A.A. members themselves, as a "malady," an "affliction," an "allergy," the acknowledgment of a major medical

institution that alcoholism was, at the very least, a “medical problem” was a step forward. While the term “disease” was never used by the AMA—a term that carried with it many implications in terms of insurance premiums, apportionment of federal funds, and other legal considerations along with questions of volition, responsibility and accountability—the organization continued its foundation-building efforts urging physicians and hospitals to treat alcoholic patients from the medical viewpoint.

A series of articles was prepared strictly for the medical profession and published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, detailing the medical, physiological, psychiatric, and sociological aspects of alcoholism. Soon, a curriculum for teaching alcoholism in medical schools was completed by the committee and distributed to every medical school in the country. In 1961 a statement was drawn up in reference to drivers and their ability to drive under the influence that established authoritative standards for levels of alcohol concentration in the blood.

* These and other advances set the stage in 1966, in Las Vegas, Nevada, for a watershed moment in the field of alcoholism where a resolution was drafted by the AMA and ultimately passed a year later in Houston, Texas, declaring alcoholism a disease that merits serious concern of all members of the health professions.

The official resolution in 1967 resolved “that the American Medical Association identifies alcoholism as a complex disease and as such recognizes that the medical components are medicine’s responsibility. Such recognition is not intended to relieve the alcoholic of moral and legal responsibility, as provided by law, for any acts committed when inebriated; nor does this recognition preclude civil arrest and imprisonment, as provided by law, for antisocial acts committed when inebriated.”

From this seminal moment nearly 45 years ago, many professional medical, religious and legal organizations around the world have come to recognize alcoholism as a disease, as well, clearing the way for greater understanding in the general public and greater availability of treatment options at both the public and private level.

Having addressed alcoholism directly as a disease and articulated medicine’s responsibility in caring for alcoholics, the AMA also recognized in that same year the part played by Alcoholics Anonymous, stating that membership in A.A. was still the most effective means of treating alcoholism and quoting Dr. Ruth Fox, an eminent authority on alcoholism: “With its thousands of groups and its 300,000 recovered alcoholics [now upwards of 2,000,000], A.A. has undoubtedly reached more cases than all the rest of us together. For patients who can and will accept it, A.A. may be the only form of therapy needed.”

Additionally, Dr. Marvin A. Block, a member of the AMA’s original Committee on Alcoholism, noted: “Perhaps the most effective treatment in the rehabilitation of the alcoholic is a philosophy of living which is compatible with the individual and his family, an absorbing faith in himself which comes only after he has learned to

understand himself, and a close association with others whose experiences parallel his own. The physician’s cooperation with Alcoholics Anonymous is one way of obtaining these things for his patient.”

The cooperation between A.A. and the professional communities has continued to flourish throughout the years since the AMA’s watershed resolution, and presentation of the 30-millionth copy of *Alcoholics Anonymous* symbolized how the spirit of cooperation can benefit the still-suffering alcoholic and bring recovery nearer for all those who want it.