

Is alcoholism a disease or a disgrace?

Den Nena Henash Our Land Speaks **OPINION**

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Editor's note: This is the second in a series of articles based on a thesis, "A Cultural-Relevant Curriculum in the Education of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Counselors Working with Alaska Natives," by Ernest J. Turner. Turner, an Athabaskan from Holy Cross, is the director of the Alaska Native Alcoholism Recovery Center in Anchorage.

Alcoholism: A disease or a disgrace?

In 1984, Dr. James R. Milam published *Under the Influence*. In this book, he wrote, "Alcoholism is tragically and fundamentally misunderstood. Every aspect of the disease is confused, distorted by myth and misconception and colored by opinions which have no firm basis in fact."

This straightforward statement describes how the majority of the people in society regard alcoholism. It is significantly different from how they view other diseases.

Some see it as a moral weakness; others see it as a character flaw or a behavioral trait; a few see it as a disease that only proper treatment can help.

A segment of researchers and some professionals argue that individual personality defects are the primary cause of alcoholism among the Natives. Alcohol, they argue, is a means of releasing aggression, anger, rage, as well as a means of escaping from societal or personal problems.

Many churches and religious groups believe alcoholism is a moral weakness or a sin. This theory would assume that in order to combat the disease, one would have to go from "being bad" to "being good."

There are also those who would argue that drinking is a behavioral trait or a habit. They suggest that addiction is only for users of those drugs that are addictive, such as heroin, morphine, opiates. They argue that people who use drugs develop a high physical tolerance to the drug in a very short time. They claim that only a small portion of alcohol users become addicted; therefore it is a psychological, habit-forming problem.

There are even those who speculate that Native drinking is a subconscious political act of demonstrating their defiance. Here it is viewed as a symbolic resistance to white oppression.

While most of society has misconceptions about alcoholism, most of the alcoholism treatment establishments support the disease theory of alcoholism.

To provide treatment, the program must develop a philosophy on alcoholism consistent with the treatment provided. While many agencies believe in external causations, ANARC maintains that the psychological, cultural and social factors may influence the alcoholic's drinking patterns and behaviors when drinking, but we believe this has no effect on whether or not a person becomes an alcoholic.

The center endorses research that defines alcoholism as genetic. To support our contention, we can point to



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research that shows the predisposing physiological factors which cause alcoholism.

As Milam wrote, "Researchers have uncovered a number of physiological differences between alcoholics and non-alcoholics. When taken together, these predisposing factors explain the alcoholic's vulnerability

to alcoholic gifts of value such as clothing, food and supplies.

Afterwards, however, fellowship often was symbolized by consuming liquor, which was obtained cheaply by whites and could be used to barter for nearly anything the Indians had."

Accepting what you are offered is still a tradition in most Alaska Native culture. Thus, when one wants to stop drinking, the conflict of the internal values of the heritage is powerful.

The vastness of the state and village isolation are also problems, especially for the young. The drinking, the fighting and sexual adventures may be by far the most exciting activity going on for many of the youngsters. For the adults, the lack of economic opportunities contribute to individual and family stress.

In addition, many of the villagers view alcoholism as an artificial illness. This belief leads to massive denial of alcoholism as a viable illness by the community. Most would rather blame Western civilization or their unique circumstances as a reason for drinking.

Alcohol addiction and alcoholism were first listed in the American Standard Classified Nomenclature of Disease in 1933, but diagnostic assess-

and disgusting to the palate," he said.

It is also generally accepted that all newcomers to Alaska used alcoholic beverages for one purpose or another, but because of the vastness of the state it is difficult to determine when and how often alcohol was available in different parts of the state.

By far the worst traders in alcoholic beverages were the first Americans to come to Alaska. They were trying to make a profit in a way they knew would work. None of the traders that exploited the resources along the Alaskan coast were particularly kind to the Alaska Natives.

"...for innate wickedness and cold-blooded barbarities in the treatment of savage or half-civilized nations no people on earth during the past century have excelled men of Anglo-Saxon origin," Hubert Howe Bancroft said in his 1965, "History of Alaska."

Drunkenness among the Natives quickly became a problem. Not until the second half of the 20th century, however, because of easy access by air to all the villages, has alcoholism become an epidemic.

According to the Indian Health Service, in 1969, by the second half of the century, alcoholism had been declared one of the most serious health problems facing Indian peoples.

It is a disease that incapacitates and kills Alaska Natives at a rate far above those for non-Natives. Beginning in 1984, IHS cited alcoholism as a direct contributing factor for at least four of the top 10 causes of death: accidents, liver disease, homicide and suicide.

The IHS also said that alcoholism is known to be detrimental to human physiology. Thus, it could hasten death from heart disease, cerebral-vascular disease, diabetes, cancers, and it is a contributing factor affecting newborns, causing conditions such as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.

Deaths from pneumonia or influenza can be caused by excessive alcohol use, due to lowering of disease resistance. In essence, the IHS states that alcoholism may significantly contribute in one way or another to 10 of the leading causes of death among Alaska Natives.

Additionally, many more Natives experience the more insidious consequences of the disease: disability, family problems, incarceration, job problems, loss of self-esteem, spiritual despair and considerable pain and illness.

Of particular concern to most Alaska Native organizations is the self-destructive behavior of the alcoholic. Data on delinquency, homicides, assaults, suicides and other socio-cultural problems show a significant impact related to alcoholism.

The public has theorized all manner of explanations for the extremely high rate of alcoholism among Alaska Natives, from moral weakness to cultural vulnerability. It is no wonder that Native people have so much trouble developing adequate approaches to the problem.

No matter the cause of alcoholism, the consequences within the Alaska Native communities are critical.

Next week, Turner will address the issue of "Alcoholism, Education and Culture." He will discuss some of the programs developed for Native alcoholics by Alaska Natives themselves. In addition, he discusses the importance of education, explaining that traditionally cultural values are passed down from the elders. This must be taken into account in treatment programs, according to Turner.

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For most drinkers, alcohol is not addictive, but some become addicted, thus alcoholism.

There is a great body of literature that speculates why the Alaska Natives become alcoholic at a percentage far greater than the rest of society. An ample supply of theories most widely held by researchers belong to the socio-cultural or environmental category. They argue that circumstantial, as well as cultural and contemporary social characteristics, have mobilized together in such a manner as to produce conditions which cause alcoholic behavior and alcoholism.

It is ANARC's contention that the reason individuals start to drink has nothing to do with alcoholism. Native alcoholics begin to drink for all the same reasons that non-alcoholics begin to drink: stimulation, relaxation, sociability, easing stress, euphoria and others.

Likewise, alcoholics, just as non-alcoholics, are influenced in the way they drink, how much they drink, when they drink by social situations, traditions and other circumstances.

Having no prior experience with alcohol, little understanding of its use or functions, the Natives, with some exceptions, drink to get drunk.

In most villages, the common practice of sharing with neighbors and friends in need also extends to sharing of alcohol. In the book, *Alaska Hooch*, published in 1988, Thayne I. Anderson wrote, "Before whites came to Alaska, Natives likely displayed friendship by exchanging non-

ment criteria were not published until 1972.

In 1983, S.B. Blume, in "The Disease Concept of Alcoholism," *Journal of Psychiatric Treatment Evaluation*, defined disease as a "condition in which bodily health is seriously attacked, deranged, or impaired; sickness or illness in which the underlying pathogenesis is clearly understood."

Alcoholism is now recognized as a disease by the World Health Organization, American Medical Association, American Psychiatric Association and most other health organizations.

The accepted criteria used to diagnose alcoholism are: an increased tolerance to alcohol, a physical dependence, the physical withdrawal symptoms and an irresistible need for alcohol when it is withdrawn.

Alaska Native Alcoholism

"The history of alcohol use in Alaska can be traced from the earliest arrival of sailors from foreign lands in 1741," according to Thayne I. Anderson in his 1988 book, *Alaska Hooch*.

"The first people to introduce alcohol to the indigenous Natives of Alaska were the Russians who sailed to Alaska from Siberia," he said.

However, it is generally accepted that the Alaska Natives did not readily accept the use of alcoholic beverages before the first contact by the Europeans.

"When Capt. James Cook offered alcoholic drinks to Indians he met in Nootka Sound in 1778, the Indians rejected them as something unnatural