

Are alcohol treatment methods too old?

by P.E. Hyslop

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At a recent Anthropology conference held in Anchorage on March 2 a symposium discussed drinking problems among Alaskan Natives. Gregg Brelsford, chairman of the symposium, said that drinking in rural Alaska is unique because of the different cultures. Although everyone on the Rural Alaskan Drinking Patterns and Alaska Native Institutions symposium agreed that drinking is a problem in rural Alaska, he said, they did

not have any answers.

Judy Ramos, a student at Alaska Pacific University, said that Native students experience a lot of stress from their families back home in the villages. Students are expected to leave their small villages for big universities in the city. Not only do they feel stress from enormous expectations from home, but the adjustment to a different, often unfriendly, environment is more than they can handle. If they quit and return to disappointed parents, family, and a village that expected them to be the next

leaders; the feeling of failure is enormous.

To keep students from dropping out of school and feeling this failure which often leads to drinking, Judy is starting a peer-counseling program at APU so Native students can emotionally support other Native students.

Another member of the panel addressed some of the problems with the methods of treatment for Native people with drinking problems. JoAnn Bernier, whose work involves ten years with alcohol and treatment programs in Alaska, thinks the antiquated alcohol treatment methods of curing alcoholism does not apply to many Natives.

She said research in the state has shown that Natives drinking patterns differ from many non-Natives.

"It may take a non-Native years and years to stop drinking but many Natives may just stop drinking in one day and quit for years, and start drinking again," she said. If the drinking pattern is different the treatment programs may not work for Natives.

She said there is a general assumption that Natives will respond positively to treatment but that is not always the case. The major difference for many is they come from cultures that discourage group discussion. One form of Alcohol Anonymous treatment is to have group discussions where individuals stand up and share their drinking history and current concerns. She said many Natives do not feel comfortable doing this. Even when they are together in a treatment program they talk about other things

such as "hunting, fishing, jail and not about drinking." This differs from many non-Natives who tend to focus on their past drinking.

JoAnn objects to one of the definitions of alcoholism which states that a person is an alcoholic if he starts hiding what he drinks. A person may say he hides his alcohol if he is from a dry village where it is illegal. Study has shown that Native people are often admitted to a treatment program with a much lower consumption level than others admitted. They may not be alcoholics.

In a telephone conversation later, Gregg Brelsford said he would like to see more media response to research done regarding drinking patterns in rural Alaska. He said he was disappointed with the small turn out at the symposium.