

Study questions alcohol treatment programs

by P. E. Hyslop

Tundra Times

A study released three months ago questions the effectiveness of state-funded alcohol treatment programs for Alaskan Natives.

Over half of the in-patients admitted to alcohol treatment programs in Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau were Natives, said Dennis Kelso, a researcher in the study. But six months after leaving treatment only 11% Natives compared to 32% non-Natives refrained from drinking.

Kelso said 40% of Natives admitted were from villages surrounding the major cities.

"Natives were over-represented in these treatment programs compared to the population," he said. "This is significant because Natives are only 16% of the population in Alaska."

Kelso, an assistant professor at the Center for Alcohol and Addiction Studies, University of Alaska-Anchorage has researched alcohol studies in Alaska for ten years. He said the question that arises is, "Are the right people in treatment?"

Most of the Natives admitted were young men who did not have a long history of drinking, did not have the same problems

chronic drinkers had, and did not want to be in the treatment programs. He said, "75% of Natives in these in-patient programs were coerced by the criminal justice system."

This differed from most non-Natives who usually admitted themselves on their own, had a longer history of drinking, and were more severely impaired from drinking. Their success rate was much higher after six months of treatment.

The treatment programs must look at the characteristics of people being admitted, said Kelso. "Either the programs should

adapt to better treatment by people who don't want to be there, are not chronic drinkers, and less severely impaired. Its like school, the kids who want to be in school learn more than the ones who don't want to be there," Kelso added.

The study points out that many patients have other problems besides alcohol. "Most of the state-funded client caseload... involves convicted criminal offenders, who also have other serious problems in addition to alcohol abuse, and who are involuntary participants in the treatment process," it stated.

Kelso said one reason the treatments are ineffective is because many Natives are admitted to change their behavior. They are not there voluntarily. He stated that in many communities drinking is a social problem not an individual problem. This is bad when the social "networks" attitude supports abusive behavior," he said. People who do not drink receive negative sanctions. "A peer group is far more important to a person in a village," he said. In these communities the alcohol treatment programs have only a temporary effect.