

# Noted Professor Says Dread Disease, Alcoholism, Attacks Six Million

Alcoholism is a dread disease. It attacks an estimated six million persons in the United States, at least one-fifth of whom are women. It occurs in one out of every twelve adult males who drink any alcohol at all.

Such are the startling facts as presented by a distinguished psychiatrist and professor of law and criminology on the Berkeley campus of the University of California.

He is Dr. Bernard L. Diamond, graduate of the UC Medical School in San Francisco and the Neuropsychiatric Institute at the University of Michigan. Among his many interests, in a broad field of social concern, is the development of an effective program for dealing with the sadly neglected problem of alcoholism.

"Most serious diseases have rates of from one to ten or twenty per hundred thousand population," he explains. "If polio, meningitis, or most of the infectious diseases begin to creep up over the five or ten per hundred thousand mark the public becomes alarmed, and huge sums of money are spent for research and control. If there are several hundred per hundred thousand, the public panics—we regard this as an epidemic.

"Yet the public fails to become alarmed about alcoholism, an illness where the rates are literally thousands per hundred thousand population. At the present time only limited funds are allotted to research and medical control of this illness."

Medical control—that is where Dr. Diamond places the emphasis. "Any informed persons," he says, "from the psychiatrist to the policeman on the beat will tell you that the habitual alcoholic is a sick individual. I have yet to meet a district attorney or policeman who will really take the old-fashioned attitude that somehow this is a moral defect."

Most people drink for reasons of sociability. But the alcoholic is not interested in social relations as such. He does not drink in order to make himself friendly or clever or to relate to people.

Typically the alcoholic is attempting to anesthetize himself. What he seeks is the relief that alcohol can provide from fear, tension and pathological cravings. Unable to take just one drink, or two, he must go on to finish the bottle. He drinks himself into a coma.

In the process of self-anesthetization, the alcoholic may wander the streets, making a conspicuous nuisance of himself, getting into fights, or perhaps driving a car.

It is precisely at this point that he is susceptible to intervention on a medical level, says Dr. Diamond. For here, at least the alcoholic is visible to the public.

He can be picked up and, instead of being put in jail, sent to a hospital.

Since it is not abnormal for an individual to take some form of alcohol almost every day of adult life, how do we tell who is not an alcoholic?

Dr. Diamond replies that, on a purely empirical basis, an individual can be considered an alcoholic when he becomes a "problem drinker." This may mean drinking to the point where he is incapable of holding a job, where he abuses his wife and children, or uses his money for alcohol to the neglect of home and family. In such cases, he's a problem drinker. Or if, after drinking, he insists on taking the car and has accidents—"then he is a problem drinker, no matter what he does at other times."

Most problem drinkers blind themselves to the effect of alcohol on their lives. They slip into this stage gradually and are often unaware of the degree to which they lower their efficiency.

The businessman, drinking heavily at lunch time, scarcely realizes that for the rest of the day accurate decision-making is impossible. The man who gradually develops the habit of drinking several fifths of Scotch per week may be oblivious to the fact that his children are going without adequate clothes.

Or the person who loses a job because of frequent "hangovers," finds any number of other excuses to explain the fact that he can't get up on Monday morning. So it is quite characteristic of the problem drinker to deny the tragic effects of his drinking.

How can we know the actual number of alcoholics in a given community?

We can only guess, says Dr. Diamond, taking our clues from two principal sources. One index is the total amount of alcoholic beverages sold. Another index is the number of people who, at time of autopsy, are discovered to have severe liver disease, particularly cirrhosis of the liver.

For there is no question that drinking to excess over a long period damages the liver. This produces definite pathological changes which can be recorded. In any event, statisticians, combining these two indices, have come up with some startling figures.

Let's look at the state of California, for example, which admittedly is far above the national average in terms of alcoholism. In 1964, the California Department of Public Health issued some statistics covering the years 1920-1962. They showed that in 1920 the rate of problem drinkers per hundred thousand population (over age 20) was 3,420.

In the year of 1962—the latest for which we have accurate figures—the rate had gone up to 8,620 per hundred thousand adult population. Over a period of forty-two years, then, the alcoholic rate in California has increased 252 per cent.

This means that at the present time at least one out of every twelve adults in California is an alcoholic problem drinker, according to reliable estimates.

Obviously, alcoholism is on the increase, not just in California, New York and other large states but throughout the nation.

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