

EDITORIAL

Narcotics Anonymous (NA): the phenomenal growth of an important resource

In July 1953 Narcotics Anonymous (NA) was started by six former heroin addicts who left their regular AA meeting in Sun Valley, California. Taking the twelve steps and twelve traditions with them they altered step one to read "We admitted that we were powerless over our addiction [as opposed to over alcohol] that our lives had become unmanageable", and otherwise adopted the AA programme of recovery as it stood to their own 'illness of addiction'. Twenty years later NA was largely confined to California with pockets of 'recovery' in various major cities. The late seventies witnessed the NA explosion so that by 1980 an estimated 20,000 'addicts' were attending regularly according to the World Service Office.*

Growth has proceeded since by some 30-40% per annum and should this continue in the U.S.A., by 1990 NA membership will exceed that of AA. In July 1986 there were over 6500 regular NA meetings registered with the World Service Office. Thirty-six countries were featured in the World Directory and a 'guesstimate' placed the world-wide membership at around 250,000. In Britain NA has grown from a single meeting in 1980 to over 70 well-attended meetings per week in the London area. Whilst the remainder of the country shows sporadic growth (daily meetings in Bristol and Weston-super-Mare, none as yet in Liverpool or Leeds), the signs of development on a scale previously seen in the U.S. are present. At the recent World Convention in London there were members present from the U.S. with over 20 years 'clean time', whilst British members (in excess of 1000) had been abstinent from 0 to 8 years according to the organizers, following the traditional 'countdown' ceremony.

* The address of the World Service Office is P.O. Box 9999, Van Nuys, California 91409, and this office can supply up-to-date statistics.

What is NA?

"NA is a non-profit Fellowship or society of men and women for whom drugs had become a major problem. We are recovering addicts who meet regularly to help each other stay clean. This is a programme of complete abstinence from all drugs. There is only one requirement for membership, the desire to stop using."¹

Like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) NA provides a series of regular meetings both in the community and in institutions (hospitals, prisons, etc.) where members meet and share their 'experience, strength and hope'. There is a 'programme of recovery' based upon the philosophy that addiction is an illness for which there is no cure. Recovery can and will take place if the addict remains abstinent from mind-altering chemicals (including alcohol) and applies him or her self to the suggested programme. This includes: frequent and regular attendances at meetings in early days; involvement with a home group and a regular commitment of service to that group (clearing up, making coffee, etc.); the selection of an experienced NA member (sponsor) on whom the addict may call at any time for advice, and a gradual but necessary understanding of the twelve steps of recovery as adopted from AA. Principles of recovery include learning how to live in the day, and that a lifestyle based upon honesty, open-mindedness and willingness (HOW) leads to an improved sense of self esteem.

Who Attends?

"Very simply, an addict is a man or woman whose life is controlled by drugs. Anyone may join us, regardless of age, race, sexual identity, creed, religion or lack of religion."¹

NA has broadened the AA concept (illness of alcoholism) to encompass the entire range of

psychoactive substances and refers to the illness of addiction. Whilst the majority of 'addicts' attending have experienced polydrug misuse, many of whom have been dependent upon opiates, others have experienced problems relating to drugs and alcohol.

No mention is made of dependence or specific drugs other than alcohol (just another sedative). In practice the attending population varies according to cultural, geographical and socio-economic variables with patterns of drug misuse following suit. In addition to the usual format, cities such as London provide a range of specialist meetings that cater for non-smokers, women (creche provided), gay men, young people and ex-offenders (although no meetings are exclusive). Abstinence is encouraged but not mandatory. Many meetings are open to non-addicts and make a point of welcoming the interested family member, friend and professional.

A Resource for the Professional

NA provides a non-judgemental caring and supportive focus, based in the community, freely available to anyone who wishes (or who can be persuaded) to attend. The attending addict is responsible for the maintenance of his or her own recovery and receives peer group support to this end. Attendance at NA can be recommended to anyone with a drug/alcohol problem, and when included as part of a treatment strategy (perhaps with a reducing 'withdrawal regime') can provide an often lonely person with places to go (including endless post-meeting cafes, fund-raising events, etc.), companionship and a support network that effectively says "Just for today we do not take drugs".

Some therapists keep a list of former clients who are willing to take newcomers to meetings. NA provides such a service and will send a recovering person to meet with a newcomer upon receipt of a telephone call (ideally from the client). Clients should be encouraged to try a number of different meetings, to keep an open mind and to look for the

similarities rather than the differences. Some find it difficult to engage directly with NA. Many are helped by a period of residential or outpatient treatment at a facility that bases its programme around the twelve steps (the so-called Minnesota Method). While some such facilities in the U.K. remain in the private sector, others are charitable trusts that offer a number of assisted places. It is sadly true that the waiting time is shorter for those able to afford fees. This is likely to remain so until the facilities which rely on charitable trusts are able to organize their funding differently.

Whilst research into such organizations is difficult, it is needed to clarify the usefulness of NA and to substantiate the treatment claims of those centres using a twelve-step approach. Once again we are witnessing the rapid growth of a self-help organization in an area of real need. If the predictions of the World Service Office continue to be accurate, there seems little doubt that Narcotics Anonymous will fulfill its promise and provide the open-minded therapist and drug abuser alike with a community-based resource of enormous value.

Information

The telephone number for NA in London is 01-351 6794 and a recorded list of meetings can be obtained by phoning 01-351 6067; Bristol, phone 0272 40084; Dublin, phone 300944 ext. 486. The number for the World Service Office (U.S.A.) is 010 818 7803951.

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1. NARCOTICS ANONYMOUS (1986) *White Booklet* (Van Nuys, CA, World Service Office).