

by Patrick Caplis, N.D.

Gary was nineteen when I met him, a beautiful vibrant blond-haired youth, who loved life and people and perhaps drank a little too much too often. We had a brief affair and later saw each other socially from time to time. When I last saw Gary, he was thirty. His handsome face is now badly scarred from injuries suffered in a motorcycle accident. His eyes are watery, his face bloated, his bulging muscles now hidden under rolls of flab. He is unemployed except when he works part time in his father's construction business. Gary is gay, and Gary is an alcoholic.

Over the past several years, the AIDS epidemic has become the major health concern of the gay community. Perhaps you are, as I was, largely unaware of the magnitude of another health problem, namely, lesbian and gay alcoholism. These are some of the facts:

- One out of every three members of the gay community is either an alcoholic or well on the road to becoming one. This includes both women and men.
- Experts estimate the number of alcoholics in America to be at least 10 million people.
- Alcoholism is ranked the #3 killer in the United States, only cardiovascular disease and cancer rank higher.
- Half of all homicides, 40% of all rapes, and as high as 60% of all suicides are alcohol-related.

Alcoholism is an actual physical disease. It is chronic, hereditary, progressive and fatal. Historically, alcoholics have been labeled morally degenerate or lacking in willpower, but researchers now understand that alcoholism is caused by certain metabolic defects in the body which makes alcoholic individuals physiologically incapable of processing alcohol normally. Over 80% of alcoholics are hypoglycemic and exhibit abnormal carbohydrate metabolism. Many alcoholics are also deficient in certain liver enzymes essential for the proper breakdown of alcohol in the body. By-products of abnormal alcohol metabolism accumulate in the blood and eventually result in the classic symptoms of the true alcoholic: 1) increased tolerance for high doses of alcohol, 2) the total inability to stop drinking once the individual starts, and 3) suffering severe withdrawal symptoms if the individual tries to stop drinking.

An estimated 10% of the general American population is alcoholic. So why is the incidence of alcoholism so much higher among lesbians and gays? No one knows for sure. We speculate that it has to do with the fact that for a long time we have been a bar-centered community. We meet in bars, we go dancing in bars, we celebrate and commiserate in bars. And when we are not in bars, we are drinking at home or drinking at parties. Alcohol is a friend to the shy man who wants to feel less inhibited. Alcohol may help a lonely and depressed woman feel like she is part of the crowd, and perhaps only when she is intoxicated can she openly express her true homosexual self. We drink to get happy, and we drink and party in order to hide from the world, to escape the painful and anxious feeling of being different, being gay.

A sense of alienation and feeling of low self-esteem coupled in some individuals with a genetic tendency toward alcoholism has resulted in an enormous increase in the number of lesbian and gay alcoholics. For us, alcoholism is not only a physical disease; it is a major symptom of our oppression as a people.

Donna was born to dance. It was obvious from just watching her walk across the room, sleek legs, supple gestures. She worked so hard at her craft, demanding so much of herself and her students. Then one

day I came to the studio and someone walked toward me sobbing. "Donna is no longer with us," she said. Booze and pills — those were her weapons. None of us were aware that Donna had been an alcoholic. While I had been out celebrating my birthday, my friend had been home dying. So now every year I get to celebrate the bitter-sweet anniversary of my birth and her death.

Alcoholics often try to hide their drinking, their feeling about their drinking, or both. For this reason, alcoholism is often referred to as a "disease of denial." People who really have no drinking problem do not find it necessary to defend their drinking to themselves or others.

Most alcoholics are not the stereotypical drunken bum on Skid Road. In most cases, alcoholics are able to hold down jobs, some-

times quite successfully. They have families and lovers, and often even close friends will be unaware of the drinking problem. Alcoholics frequently choose fellow alcoholics as their friends.

Most drinking alcoholics do not want to be helped. They are sick people, unable to think rationally, and usually incapable of permanently giving up alcohol by themselves. They may understand that drinking is creating difficulties in their lives, but it is only when they try to stop drinking that the real trouble begins. The tension, frustrations, tremors, irritability and nausea finally become so unbearable that they have to drink because alcohol is the fastest way to relieve the pain.

Many alcoholics have had to be forced into treatment against their will. Either by order of a judge following a serious accident, or by a partner threatening to pack up and leave, or

perhaps by an employer warning of termination, the alcoholic is backed into a corner so that she or he finally agrees to a treatment program.

As part of my medical training, I was required to attend autopsies. I remember the autopsy of a 22-year-old Native American man who had died technically of pneumonia. Actually, he was a late-state alcoholic who had probably become drunk and vomited while lying down so that some of his vomitus had gotten down into his lungs which resulted in the pneumonia which later killed him. When the autopsy team removed the liver from his body, I was appalled at its size. His liver was easily as large as a good-sized watermelon, weighing perhaps twenty five pounds. In order to have such a grossly enlarged fatty liver, this 22-year-old would have had to have been drinking very heavily for many years.

Most alcoholics die at a young age. Between the onset of any of a variety of specific diseases: malnutrition, ulcers, pancreatitis, cancers of the throat and esophagus, frequent infections, liver and heart disease, brain atrophy. Alcohol also acts as an immunosuppressant, and a large percentage of persons with AIDS have a previous history of alcohol and/or drug abuse. Statistically, women alcoholics are more likely than men to develop liver damage and other alcohol-related diseases.

Most alcoholics will die of their disease. This is because substantially less than 10% of the victims of alcoholism will ever seek or receive treatment. But it is important to bear in mind that alcoholism, in proven fact, is a readily treatable illness.

The goal is to help the alcoholic individual stop drinking and stay sober. This often initially requires participation in an alcohol treatment program followed by regular attendance at meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Here in Portland, we are fortunate in having many community resources available to help any gay person quit drinking. The Gay Alcoholics Hotline (231-3760) is staffed by volunteers who invite you to call them between 10:00 P.M. and 7:00 A.M. any night of the week if you have a question or a problem about drinking — yours, or that of someone for whom you care. In December, Phoenix Rising will be offering a Chemical Dependence Workshop. (Call 223-8299 for further information.)

Another important community out-reach group is the Live And Let Live Club, located at 2403 S.E. Ankeny. The Live And Let Live Club is a non-profit organization established by a group of lesbian and gay members of Alcoholics Anonymous. The primary purpose of the club is to rent space for meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous and other "12-step programs," such as Narcotics Anonymous and Overeater Anonymous. Meetings of A.A. take place three or four times daily at the Club.

From its beginning to the present, the Live And Let Live Club has received most of its support from the gay/lesbian community; however all Club events are open to the general public free of charge. The Club will soon celebrate a half-decade of service to the lesbian and gay community, and an open house is planned for December 1st. (Please call 231-3760 for further details.) For information about other Alcoholics Anonymous groups in the Portland area call the Portland Area Intergroup at 223-8569.

Addiction is hating yourself, and the only way out of addiction is learning to love yourself. If you have a drinking problem, at least consider the possibility of seeking advice or treatment. If you are concerned about the devastating epidemic of alcoholism in our community, become informed. Someone you love may need your help — before it's too late.

Patrick Caplis is a Portland area naturopathic physician.



Alcoholism: The Unseen Epidemic