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Opinion

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The stigma of alcohol and other drug abuse

BY BARBARA CIMAGLIO
FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

There are many barriers in the struggle against alcohol and other drug abuse. There are personal barriers, such as denial by abusers that they have a problem at all, which keep many people from seeking treatment. There are many cultural barriers, such as the high level of acceptance of using alcohol and tobacco products, which can lead to abuse, addiction and serious health problems. There are knowledge barriers, such as a lack of understanding of dangers and addictive powers of drugs such as alcohol and marijuana. And there's the societal barrier of stigma, which was illustrated by a U.S. Department of Education decision this month to withhold various forms of financial aid from some college and university students convicted of drugs charges. A rule approved by the education department will bar students who have been convicted of drug charges in state of federal court from receiving Pell Grants, student loan and other kinds of federal financial aid. When the rules takes effect on July 1, 2000, the government will withhold aid eligibility for one year from people with a first conviction on drug-possession offense, two years for a second conviction, and indefinitely for a third conviction. A student convicted of selling drugs will lose eligibility for two years for a first conviction, and indefinitely for a second conviction. Someone not trained to deal with people who have or have had an alcohol or drug problem might see such a rule as a deterrent to substance abuse. In many cases, however, it can be just the opposite. A rule denying

education money for people with drug problems can further demoralize the very people we're trying to help. Some young people would consider the rules another sign that society doesn't care about them and simply wants to punish them, which could push them a step deeper into drugs use and further away from getting treatment. I'm sure some people simply will not even try to attend college after this rule takes effect. Fortunately, the rule incased a provision that the "indefinite" penalties can be removed for students who complete drug rehabilitation programs and for those whose convictions are set aside or reverse it also requires students to "self-certify" any criminal record on their federal aid forms, and does not require schools to question applicants. That shows how little the rule's writers understand about people with alcohol and other drug problems. This rule is a superficial attempt to address a very complex problem. A better tactic would be to increase the higher education system's ability to identify and help students with alcohol and drug problems. For years colleges and universities have ignored or done very little to deal with students' alcohol and drug problems. Only in the past few years have institutions started facing problems such as student binge drinking, which has reached epidemic level. Education is the key to preventing alcohol and drug problems. Support, understand and treatment are the key to helping people with substance problems. The federal education departments rule however well intended could end up being part of the problem instead of the solution.

Letter to the Editor

Letter to the Editor
Rescue Health Care Day is Coming Every once in a while a special event affords millions of Americans the opportunity to simultaneously register their concerns and their demands for change. On Rescue Health Care Day, April 1, 2000, Americans can join together to register a "Vote of No Confidence" in corporate managed care and learn from a national dialogue on alternatives. The ultimate goal is to replace managed care with a more pro-patient, pro-quality system. As you know, the managed care industry has taken control over the consumer's choice of clinician and facility, has damaged medical privacy, and has abrogated control over treatment decisions, leaving both consumers and clinicians with far less say in such decisions. Further, many clinicians feel that they have either been given incentives to under-treat patients, have been coerced into spending far too little time with patients, or been made economically

dependent on managed care organizations (MCOs) because the MCOs control the flow of patients to clinicians. Because of this economic dependency and the ability of their livelihood by advocating for their patients against the managed care companies. Further, unconscionable sums of money are now going to corporate and shareholder profit and executive income. Quality has declined in many areas, and in many disciplines, students are being trained by the bottom line, impersonal principles of industrialized health care, encouraging them to miss or lose sight of the sensitivities and needs of the human beings they will treat and the complex problems patients will bring to them. Mental health care has been hit terribly hard by this industry. According to a study by the Hay Group, between 1987 and 1997, the industry cut medical spending by 7%, but cut mental health spending by 54%.

Karen Shore, Ph.D

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When zero tolerance isn't zero tolerance

BY EARL OFARI HUTCHINSON
FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

On September 17, 1999 a brawl broke out at a football game at Eisenhower High School in Decatur, Illinois. The mostly white school board expelled seven black students involved in the fight for two years. Some faced criminal charges for their part in the fight. The expulsions triggered protests, marches, and demonstrations led by the Reverend Jesse Jackson. Black leaders lambasted the board's decision to expel the students as racist. On November 19, a brawl broke out between an African-American and a white student at Palmdale intermediate school in Palmdale, a suburban bedroom community near Los Angeles. The black student died from injuries that resulted either from a blow to the head from the white student or after hitting his head on the pavement when he fell. The mostly white Palmdale school officials suspended the student for five days. There were no criminal charges filed against him. The paper-light suspension did not trigger angry marches, protests, and demonstrations. However, black leaders lambasted the hand slap punishment as a glaring example of a racially-tinged double standard by white school officials when a black student is victimized. There was no evidence that the fight was racially-motivated. But black leaders pointed to the spate of racist violence that has rocked the Palmdale area in recent years and culminated in the vicious beating death of a black homeless man by three Nazi low riders as proof that hate groups may be everywhere in the area, including on school campuses. If Decatur school officials grossly overreacted to the violence it was in part due to the Columbine high school rampage and the horrific wave of


shootings at high schools nationally. The shootings stoked public fears that violence-prone youth are running amok on school campuses. School officials everywhere have felt duty bound to take tough action to assure the public that they are doing something about it. Decatur school officials also overreacted in part due to the ultra-stereotyped branding of young black males as perennial, murder-and-mayhem, menace-to-society thugs. If Palmdale school officials grossly underreacted to the violence they leave themselves wide open to the charge that they are hypocritical, and inconsistent in applying their zero tolerance policy. Under a law passed by the California Legislature in January, 1998 school districts statewide are required to adopt a zero tolerance policy toward illicit student behavior. The law mandates that a student be expelled for one year for infractions that include drug sales, robbery, assault, weapons possession, and fights that cause serious physical injury to another person. The only exception to the rule is if the student that caused the injury acted in self-defense. The draconian action by Decatur school officials, and the inaction by Palmdale school officials, raised the bigger question of whether a zero tolerance policy for school violence effectively keeps students and the community out of harms way, or is a repressive tool that victimizes black and Latino students. The federal Gun Free Schools Act passed in 1994 requires that states boot students out for weapons possession in order to get money under the elementary and secondary education act. School officials quickly expanded the list of violations for student expulsion to include fighting and other violent acts. Black and Latino students became instant targets of the zero tolerance

rules. Some state legislators in California were so alarmed by the lopsided numbers of black and Latino students being kicked out of schools that they proposed legislation to sharply limit the power of school districts to expel students. It went nowhere. In Decatur, Jesse Jackson railed that consigning the expelled students to an alternative school was no answer. Their punishment, he claimed, would put them hopelessly behind in their studies, stigmatize and embarrass their parents, and further polarize an already hyper-racially charged community. Palmdale school officials face the same dilemma. If they expel the student involved in the fistfight with Corson for a year and banish him to an alternative school would this do irreparable educational and social damage to him, and his parents, and deepen the racial schisms in the area? The aim of a zero tolerance school policy is to send a hard message to students that violent acts on campus will not be tolerated. But is a zero tolerance message really necessary? Despite media exaggeration of juvenile crime and violence, school-associated shootings have plunged in the past five years. Better and more effective school counseling and mediation programs, and greater parental and teacher involvement are the major reasons for the drop in school violence—not zero tolerance policies. There is also the danger that an inflexible zero tolerance policy that dumps students into makeshift alternative schools, or worse, on the streets, will push school drop out rates and criminal activity higher. As it now stands zero tolerance is nothing more than a momentary Band-Aid solution to school violence that overly penalizes black and Latino students. That was the problem in Decatur and it's the problem in Palmdale.

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