

## Programs that will help you stay on the wagon

In the current hit film, Neil Simon's *Only When I Laugh*, actress Marsha Mason portrays an alcoholic who spends her life's savings for a 12-week "cure" at a sanitarium - and falls off the wagon once she returns to the real world of career, motherhood, and friends who drink even as they try to keep her from doing so. If you know someone addicted to alcohol, or are among the 10% of all social drinkers who regularly become dependent on what counselors consider a mood-altering drug, don't think that a hospital stay alone provides a permanent solution. "Aftercare is every bit as important as the in-patient treatment," says Richard W. Easterly, executive director of the Chit Chat Foundation, which has a rehabilitation program for alcoholics in Wernersville, Pa.

While treatment as an in-patient can be expensive - the Chit Chat program costs roughly \$3,000 for 28 days of intensive therapy and behavior modification sessions - you can expect to pay nothing for aftercare to keep you sober. It is provided by Alcoholics Anonymous, the 45-year old "fellowship of men and women" with a record of success in helping addicts refrain from drinking. It collects no fees, charges no dues, and keeps no membership rolls - admitting anyone who simply has a desire to stop drinking.

Your first visit to an A.A. meeting will probably surprise you. Anonymity begins outside the meeting place, usually with a small sign bearing an innocuous name - such as "Discussion Group" - and no

reference to A.A. Whether you have been provided with a contact by a therapist or hospital, urged to attend a meeting by an employer or family member, or realized that your ability to function effectively at home or work is being impaired by alcohol, you will be free to use your full name, nickname, or a factious name. Because groups meet in offices, schools, churches, lodges, and private homes, your chances of encountering Skid Row types are nonexistent if you drop in on one in your neighbourhood or near your office. The people around you will include your peers. One-third are likely to be female, and a few may be teenagers.

Do not expect anyone to rush toward you with a membership application - there are none to fill out - and chances are that at a meeting in a large metropolitan area, few A.A. members will even glance your way. At an "open" meeting, which can be attended by alcoholics and nonalcoholics alike, a volunteer "leader" will begin by saying something like, "Hello, I'm Robert, and I'm an alcoholic." He may then introduce one or two A.A. members who will discuss their own drinking experiences and relate what sobriety has meant to them. Afterwards, others may note their similar or dissimilar experiences.

"The objective," says a corporate executive who joined A.A. two years ago, "is to help alcoholics continually remind themselves that they have a disease that makes them different from many other people. And yet you see that

you are like millions of others: so there is no need to drink because you are alone."

No A.A. group member can teach you how to "control" your drinking, so that you can have a few beers on Sunday or a glass of wine at lunch. Instead, you will learn that others - with problems and pressures and a need for relaxation every bit as great as yours - manage to avoid taking the first drink in any 24-hour period. Unlike other groups that employ the "shared experience" methods to help people cut down on cigarettes, food, or whatever, A.A. aims to help you completely eliminate alcohol from your life on a day-to-day basis.

How quickly or slowly you manage to reach a continuous state of sobriety depends entirely on you. There are no firm rules on how many meetings you must attend. Some individuals find that the more people met who have the same problem and the more tales heard about members' experiences, the more their own decision to steer clear of alcohol is reinforced. So

it is not uncommon for a new member to attend 90 meetings in as many days.

You can seek any member - someone whose sobriety you respect - to become your "sponsor" and be available to talk with you by phone or in person on a daily basis if need be. And you can change sponsors or have more than one at any time if that makes you feel more comfortable.

Be prepared for laughs at meetings, too. One member, momentarily fretting that his mother had told a neighbour that her son had joined A.A., says: "I wasn't embarrassed to be publicly drunk and get thrown out of fine restaurants for years. It seems strange to have to keep my sobriety secret."

For pamphlets on A.A. and information on meetings in your area, write General Service Office of A.A., P.O. Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York 10163. Or check your local phone book under Alcoholics Anonymous.