

# The Mysterious Medicine of Alcoholics Anonymous

*Condensed from Today's Health, published by American Medical Assn.*

**Paul DE Kruif**

Twenty-five years ago, alcoholism was among the most hopeless of human afflictions. The millions suffering from it were largely untouchable by the science of medicine. Today there's a reversal in their dreadful fate. More than 250,000 ex-drunks are now leading normal productive lives - many of them better citizens than those of us who can take it or leave it alone.

This astounding victory had no medical origin; the victims themselves were their own doctors. Their medicine is not chemical. Their curious weapons against alcoholic doom is an utterly abject humility. They have one commander, not human, only God - God as each of them individually understand Him.

They have absolutely no organization and reject all outside donations. They follow a strict rule: the names of none of them must be publicly known. Sacrifice and humility - these are the secrets of their death-fighting power.

Such is the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous.

In 1934 there was only one lone A.A. He was a brilliant man,

as alcoholics often are, but despite his brains he had fought a losing battle against the bottle, often ending up literally in the gutter. He was on his way to commitment for alcoholic. The beginning of the salvation of this "Mr. Bill," as A.A.'s call him, was a spiritual mystery. He was befriended by a former drunk. "Ebby," who assured him that the one medicine for alcoholics was a simple belief in God. A surrender to God: "Thy will, not mine, be done." What made Ebby a bit offbeat as a missionary was that, although sober then, he could not stick to his own medicine. He couldn't stop drinking for good.

Bill, a confirmed atheist himself, was hardly a candidate for Ebby's theoretical therapy. All he had was a desperate desire to stop drinking. Once, drying out in a hospital (he knew this was a temporary expedient), Bill felt his depression deepen unbearably till at last it seemed as if he'd sunk to the bottom of the pit.

Suddenly he found himself crying out, "If there is a God, let Him show Himself! I'm ready to do anything, anything!"

All at once the room seemed

lit up with a great white light. He was in ecstasy. It burst upon him that he was a free man, free from his demon. All through him there was a wonderful feeling of a "Presence."

Then Bill became frightened. His scientific education told him, "You're hallucinating. Better call a doctor." It was providential that he confided his vision to Dr. William Duncan Silkworth, for many years physician-in-chief of the Charles B. Towns Hospital in New York City. "Dr. Silky," out of his vast experience, knew well that there was no medical hope whatever for most alcoholics, and this had stirred his compassion for down-and-out-drunks.

"I'm crazy, Doc," said Bill, in a panic. Dr. Silkworth probed him with questions. At last he said, "no, Bill, you're not crazy. There's been some basic spiritual event here."

Bill now remembered a book he'd read in his search for a cure. It was *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, by the psychologist William James. James taught that true religious experiences have a common denomination of pain, suffering, calamity, complete hopelessness. This "deflation at depth" had to come, said James, before any victim was ready for God's medicine. And that was exactly what had happened to Bill before his illumination.

Bill, nothing if not a promoter, now wanted to tell other alcoholics about his experience. He envisioned beginning a chain reaction among them. "I started out after drunks on jet propulsion," says Bill. "It was a kind of twin-engine power drive - one part genuine spirituality, and one part my old desire to be a No.1 man, a big shot."

Bill's drunk-fixing turned out to be a flop. At the end of six

months, none of the scores of inebriates he'd tried to bring to see God had sobered up. "look, Bill," said Dr. Silkworth, "you're having nothing but failure because you are *preaching* at these alcoholics. You've got to deflate these people first. Give them the medical business. Pour it into them about the sensitivity of their bodies that condemns them to go mad or die if they keep on drinking." They'd listen if it came from another alcoholic, Dr. Silky said. And then Bill might suggest the God medicine to them.

That got Bill his first convert, a physician in Akron, Ohio - Dr. Bob. Then these two guys got busy working on others. That 1935 summer in Akron, out of many attempts, Bill and Dr. Bob converted just one more alcoholic. The three of them were the first group of A.A.'s.

By 1939 Bill and Bob proudly counted a total of some 100 absolutely down-and-out drunks now dry. They presumed to write a book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, to celebrate this unparalleled achievement. The book was built around what they called 12 steps leading to sobriety. We'll boil them down: Have a real desire to quit. Admit you can't. (this is the hardest step.) Make a rigorous confession of personal defects. Resolve to help others. Ask for God's ever present help. Accept and acknowledge that help.

At first the medical profession was dubious about a method that seemed "in no sense scientific." But more and more doctors began to come to the aid of Bill and his exhibulous band. Distinguished psychiatrist Dr. Harry Tiebout, of Greenwich, Conn., had completely failed to cure alcoholic patients - *scientifically*. Then one of his

patients, a deeply alcoholic woman, came to him after her first A.A. meeting: "I think I have the answer. I'll never drink again, Doctor." And she hasn't.

This woman and other recovered people told Dr. Tiebout of their accepting a higher power - namely, God. But first, the A.A.'s taught them, they had to acknowledge their own helplessness; they had to admit they'd hit bottom. The trouble with typical alcoholics is that they're arrogantly sure they'll lick this booze business" themselves. Not until they finally find they can't, Dr. Tiebout saw, do they hit bottom. Then they can choose: to go down to insanity or death - or to start up toward God. When they chose God, they don't want to drink anymore. It is as simple as that.

"The miracle of A.A. was now clearer to me," says the doctor. "Hitting bottom became by therapeutic goal with alcoholics."

Bill and Bob and their converts counted more and more recoveries. By recovery they meant sobriety, total, complete and permanent. After six years the number had mushroomed to more than 2000, and by the end of the seventh year, to 8000. One reason for this astounding growth is, in the words of famed neuropsychiatrist Dr. Foster Kennedy, of New York, "Every cured drunkard is a missionary to the sick. God having saved them, they thank Him by doctoring others."

No A.A. need by anonymous to family, friends or neighbours. But before the public - press, radio, films and TV - the revelation of identity is not for them. Why? Bill explains it simply. The A.A.'s are really a new kind of person. To gain enough humility to stay alive they have had to give up what have been characteristics common to most of them - excessive ambition and pride - and quit their crazy contest for personal prestige.

Anonymity is only another word for humility, the spiritual key to their way of life.

Now members of the medical profession gave A.A. high praise, recognizing it as the real treatment for alcoholics. And by thousands the doctors referred problem drinkers to Alcoholics Anonymous. But where in the early days all recovered alcoholics had to begin at real bottom, as strictly skid-row bums, now physicians began to ask the A.A. brethren an embarrassing question: "Just how deep is bottom? How do you recognize an early alcoholic? If we knew that, we could begin to raise the bottom."

Bill explained that the first sign is a loss of control of drinking. Many, perhaps most, people who drink have some experience with intemperance. But the potential alcoholic realizes he's beginning to get drunk at the wrong time - when the consequences could be painfully damaging. Using this sign, physicians have been able to discover incipient drunks by thousands and thousands. Doctors tell such patients that the fact they haven't yet lost their jobs doesn't mean that they aren't in danger, and send them to join a group of A.A.'s.

"It's the doctors who now recruit a third of all our cases," explains Bill. "That's why we number about 250,000 today." And A.A. puts its recovery rate at 75 per cent of all who sincerely try its treatment.

With such as resounding success, how does it happen that A.A. is still utterly without organization? No hospitals, no paid trained experts. A.A. remains a loosely knit fellowship, thousands of little groups of recovered drunks who meet constantly to sustain each other against their number one enemy, alcohol. The doors of the meeting places are

always open for victims no matter how far gone. They try to lift up all who fall, which many do.

Why has the fellowship insisted on staying poor?

"John D. Rockefeller, Jr., must be thanked for that," says Bill. "We once asked him for funds for hospitals and a big organization. Mr. Rockefeller was

deeply moved. But he said, 'I'm afraid money would spoil this thing.' He rejected the plea flatly."

An associate of Rockefeller had said, "Why, A.A. is first-century Christianity!" And of course we all know that first-century Christians changed the world - without money.

*Source: Reader's Digest, June 1960.*