

## EDITORIAL

# IT'S A SLAP IN THE FACE OF A.A.

*New legislation designed to open doors  
for people with disabling diseases may be closing  
doors to recovery for alcoholics.*

*by Russ Pulliam*

Buried in the fine print of a civil rights bill in Congress is the question of whether alcoholics and drug addicts need more civil rights. Or do they need to assume more responsibility for their own problems?

The Americans with Disabilities Act is designed to open up doors of opportunity for people with various kinds of handicaps, providing for ramps for wheel-chairs and specially adapted restrooms in a wide range of places. The legislation already approved by the Senate and a committee in the House of Representatives, will come up this year in Congress.

Underlying the legislation is the assumption that alcohol abuse is a disability that also deserves special accommodation, on the grounds that alcoholism is a disease a person is not responsible for getting.

The disease theory takes many forms, sometimes pointing just to the physical damage alcohol abuse does cause the body. Some people can never control their drinking, and genetics may be the cause. Proponents of the disease theory argue that it has helped some people realize they have a problem,

a need to get treatment and to abstain from alcoholic beverages. But critics of the theory suggest that it relieves responsibility for the drinking problem, and they also note that the medical field has not come up with a sure cure.

"The more psychologists and attorneys dismiss forms of misbehaviour as uncontrollable compulsions, the less people are help accountable for their actions - even when they have harmed others," writes Stanton Peele, a consultant with Mathematica Policy Research in Princeton, New Jersey.

"Creating a world of addictive diseases may mean creating a world in which anything is excusable," he adds in his *Sciences* magazine commentary.

Trouble from the disease theory abounds when it is introduced into the legal system, especially as a matter of civil rights. Specialists who help people get off the bottle emphasize the responsibility of the alcoholic to recover and abstain from drinking. In the hands of lawyers, though, the client is never at fault. It's always the fault of the employer, or the disease, or the employer's failure to offer treatment for the alcoholism at the right time or the

right place. That approach suits the alcoholic just fine, because one of the symptoms of the problem is to blame everyone else.

At this point, "civil rights" for alcoholics could hurt alcoholics badly. What's needed for recovery is not civil rights, which leads to lawyers and lawsuits. The need is the alcoholic's growing sense of responsibility.

One of the most effective responses to alcohol abuse has been Alcoholics Anonymous, which places heavy stress on the responsibility of the alcohol abuser through the Twelve Steps.

"Make a searching and fearless moral inventory of yourself," declares one step, followed by, "admit to God, and to yourself, the exact nature of your wrongs. Be entirely ready to have God remove

all these defects of character." Other steps include restitution to offended people.

The principles of A.A. don't include a list of civil rights for the alcoholic. Adding this problem to a legal list of disabilities is not just bad law and bad policy. It's a slap in the face of Alcoholics Anonymous and its work with people for so many years.

So far drug addiction has been successfully removed from the legislation, on the sensible grounds that drug addicts do not need additional civil rights at a time when the federal government is declaring war on illegal drugs. The next sensible step is to take alcoholism out of this legislation as well. Civil rights and alcohol abuse make a bad mix.

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