

Life Membership

Medicine Column

The organization of ex-drinkers known as Alcoholics Anonymous last week was rounding out its twelfth year. Taking stock, it found that it had 35,000 members and 1,200 chapters (including outposts in Canada and Latin America). It was picking up new members at the rate of 1,000 a month. In the last few months, A.A.'s stock among doctors and an estimated 750,000 U.S. alcoholics had climbed fast.

A.A. was founded twelve years ago by a still-anonymous Manhattan stockbroker, known only as Bill, and an alcoholic Akron doctor. The organization has no officers, no dues, no big funds (its small Manhattan headquarters last year spent only \$35,000, donated by members). Pledged to help other alcoholics, members do little proselyting, help only when they are called on. Before A.A., all but 5% of alcoholics were considered hopeless. Of A.A.'s regular members, some 50% never touch a drop after they join; 25% get on the wagon after one or two slips.

Clean Wind. A.A.'s method (inspired by William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*) rests on an appeal to a Higher Power (God, or whatever Force the member prefers) for strength to resist the compulsion to drink. Founder Bill, describing his "spiritual awakening," said: "I felt lifted up, as though the great clean wind of a mountaintop blew

through and through." Psychiatrists, who use much fancier words, describe the process as the "use of a religious or spiritual force to attack the fundamental narcissism of the alcoholic."

An A.A. member's self-treatment has twelve well-defined steps. Among other things, he must admit that he cannot take it or leave it; he has got to quit cold. Members are ready, day or night, to answer a desperate call for help from a backsliding member. Secret of the A.A. help: fellow alcoholics do not scold nor misunderstand an alcoholic who wants to quit; they know exactly what hurdles he has to be helped over.

Urge to Talk. One of A.A.'s worries is preserving its members' anonymity. Members have a marked tendency to gossip and declare themselves. A.A. insists on anonymity as a reassurance to prospective members. Women members (who comprise about a third of A.A.) are another problem. A large proportion of women alcoholics drop out after a few months.

As every Alcoholics Anonymous knows, "twelfth-step work" (helping other alcoholics) is one of the most important single factors in keeping members on the wagon. No cure, the A.A. method is effective only as long as a member keeps it up. An A.A. member is in for life. Those who quit usually go back to the bottle.