

REPORTS

REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON ALCOHOLISM, HELD AT THE ROYAL EDINBURGH HOSPITAL ON FRIDAY 6 NOVEMBER 1970

This conference was held in Edinburgh at the beginning of November to initiate a Government sponsored health education campaign to help the alcoholic and his family in Scotland. The symposium was jointly organized by the Scottish Health Education Unit, the Scottish Council on Alcoholism, and Alcoholics Anonymous. It is hoped that similar meetings will be convened in other areas of the country.

An invited audience of representatives from the medical and legal professions, local authorities, industry, the churches and voluntary groups heard a variety of interesting speakers during the morning and afternoon sessions—consultant psychiatrist, a senior social worker, a person with first hand knowledge of alcoholism within the family, an industrialist, a lawyer, a general practitioner and finally the Director of the Scottish Health Education Unit. Mr Taylor, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Education, gave the introduction.

The consultant psychiatrist, whose talk was one of the most interesting of the day, gave an outline of the progressive nature of this relapsing incurable disease. He dealt successively with the medical and social consequences, the high suicide rate as well as morbidity and the pharmacology of addiction. Recognition of the disease in its earlier stage is difficult but typical manifestations are the increasing use of excuses and opportunities for a drink, development of tolerance, failing daily task performance and fear of loss of supply. Signs of addiction were then discussed being exemplified by 'black-outs', morning tremor, physical illness and delirium tremens. Following increased tolerance there is a marked decrease in such tolerance. Work competence fails and the family starts to break-up. Finally he spoke on management and said that such should include specific alcoholism units, involvement of the family in support, and alcoholics anonymous amongst several other measures.

The social worker in his contribution emphasized the problem of present social attitudes to drinking and that treatment must involve the family as well as the individual. The speaker, who had a personal view on the problem, also emphasized that alcoholism concerns not only the affected individual but the whole family. She described its impact at the psychological and emotional level on the spouse, and how the sexual and psychological marriage relationship between the partners is completely disrupted. She also described the influences of the disease on a parent in connection with the rearing of children.

During the afternoon there were four talks, on alcoholism in industry, alcoholism and the law, alcoholism and general practice. The main theme that ran through the talks was that, although the prevalence of alcoholism was high especially in Scotland, approximately one family in ten having an alcoholic in their midst, the condition was largely undiagnosed. Unless primary prevention against alcoholism can be encouraged by education and the acceptance by society that this is a disease and not something morally wrong, the only answer to the problem is secondary prevention, *e.g.* by setting up regional alcoholism units and other such salvage work.

At the conclusion the feeling was general that this conference had been a successful step forward in promotion of the new education campaign. As Mr Taylor said in his opening remarks few will quarrel with the Health Education Unit's decision to follow-up its previous anti-smoking campaign with action on providing information to the public where help on alcoholism can be had. The unit is to spend £8,000 on bringing more practical help to the family with an alcoholic in their midst. During the Conference the effects of alcoholism on industry was voiced. This is only the tip of the iceberg and early diagnosis can be helped by awareness of the general practitioner of the problem. Mr Taylor emphasized that the problem of alcoholism is now being dragged out of the shadows and increasingly recognized as a treatable illness which unfortunately is almost reaching epidemic proportions. The launching of this campaign is not only opportune, but urgent.