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## Addiction Medicine & Psychiatry



### Recovering Alcoholics Can Play a Key Role in Educating Doctors

When recovering alcoholics complain to me that “physicians don’t know anything useful about alcoholism” I tell them that I’m not surprised. After all, the primary contact a doctor has with alcoholics is in the clinic – when they’re lying – or in intensive care – when they’re dying.

The main reason doctors never learn that alcoholics and other addicts have a disease from when they can recover is that although doctors routinely see patients who are successfully controlling other diseases (diabetes is a good example), they rarely see recovering alcoholics who are comfortably abstinent, have not substituted other symptoms for the alcoholism, and are living productive, happy lives.

For these reasons, recovering alcoholics are in an excellent position to do educate doctors and other therapists. A good time to do it is on AA birthdays, when recovering alcoholics celebrate the anniversary of their first day of sobriety.

If you are a recovering alcoholic, here’s what you can do.

On your AA birthday, instead of just receiving birthday cards, why don’t you start sending some birthday cards to inform significant other people about your AA birthday? An excellent person to send such a birthday card to would be the doctor who was treating you during the days when you were drinking.

The birthday card should be in the form of a brief letter. In a warm, tactful and dispassionate way, briefly summarize the clinical relationship that existed between you and your doctor in those bad old days.

Here is a sample letter that I have outlined for such occasions.

Dear Dr. (fill in the doctor’s name):

As you may recall, I was a patient of yours (fill in appropriate time) when my family and I were living in (name the city). During those years, you – very kindly and with the best of intentions – treated me for mild diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, insomnia, “mild abnormalities” of my liver function tests and occasional – to you puzzling, and to me embarrassing – injuries and impotence.

After I joined Alcoholics Anonymous in (fill in the appropriate year), my family and I came to realize that I had actually been an alcoholic since about (fill in the appropriate year). As a result of rehabilitation, education, personal and spiritual growth in AA, I now realize what had gone wrong. You as a clinician and I as a patient – in spite of our best intentions – managed to conceal my alcoholism from both of us.

It is clear to me now that the “symptoms and illnesses” I had were caused or made worse by my alcoholism, because very soon after I joined AA and stopped drinking, my symptoms and illnesses disappeared. I have not seen a doctor since (fill in appropriate year) except for annual physical examinations, which my employer requires. (Incidentally, I was promoted to vice president in (fill in appropriate year).

I have maintained normal body weight, and I have not taken any medications because I have no illnesses or accidents. My family and I have found a new kind of happiness, unknown to us for many years. As a family, we appreciate the fine medical help you provided.

In retrospect, it appears now than neither you nor I knew enough – or felt comfortable enough – to deal with my alcoholism. As a recovering alcoholic, I’m hereby expressing any willingness to come to your office for a visit during which I would freely talk with you about my alcoholism in terms of what was really going on with me while I was your patient, and what has happened to me since then. (In AA, we call it

“what I used to be like, what happened and what I’m like now”).

Naturally, I’m prepared to pay your regular fee for such a visit.

With this letter I am delighted to let you know that this month is my (fill in the appropriate number) AA birthday – I am (appropriate number) years clean and sober. Next year, the good Lord willing, I will send you another (much briefer) birthday card to keep you informed of the state of my health and sobriety.

Please accept my apologies for any lies I may have told you and problems I may have caused you. They were a product of my illness.

Sincerely and gratefully yours,  
(Recovering alcoholics name)

If you, as a recovering alcoholic or addict are wondering what good such a letter might do, here are two possibilities. Your doctor will talk with you, learn a lot about alcoholism, and treat alcoholics and other addicts more effectively as a result.

If, on the other hand, your worst fear comes true, and you receive an angry rejection or no response at all, you will know that your doctor (or the person that opens the clinic mail) has at least an attitude problem about alcoholism.

In any case, instead of just cursing the darkness and griping about “those doctors,” you will have made amends, and you will have carried the message to a doctor who is still suffering in ignorance.

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