

JOSEPH A. PURSCH, M.D.

Addiction Medicine & Psychiatry



With Friends Like These, an Alcoholic Needs No Enemies

Often, the alcoholic's best friends are his worst enemies. That was certainly true for Bob, a patient on the Orthopedic Ward. I was seeing him in consultation because on his third post-operative day, he was found drunk in his hospital bed.

"I only had a couple of drinks with my buddies," he explained with a defensive edge in his voice. "They just happened to have some booze with them when they came to visit. They mean no harm. After all – they're my friends, and I hope you're not gonna call me an alcoholic!"

"How can I call you anything if I haven't even talked to you?" I asked matter of factly. "Tell me about your drinking and your friends."

"A am a controlled drinker," he said, a little more calmly.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"My friends and I . . . we sometimes set out to get drunk on purpose . . . usually on Friday nights. But we always know what we are doing," he explained.

"When did it get to be a problem?" I asked.

Bob bristled. "What do you mean – a problem?"

I decided to shift the conversation into another area. "According to a social worker's notes in your chart, your wife, Betsy, said you insulted your boss."

"Nah, she's exaggerating. Besides, I didn't mean it. Anyway, my friends said that when I told him off – that was whiskey talking . . . Besides, I don't even remember doing it."

"Do you often forget things like that?" I asked.

"Oh, maybe a few times." He looked up suspiciously. "What would that mean, anyhow?"

I started to explain, "It's called a 'blackout.' It means that the brain is . . ."

But Bob interrupted. "It couldn't be serious. My buddies have that, too."

"When was the last time you got injured?" I asked.

"I broke my ankle stealing second base at the company picnic."

"Were you drinking?" I asked.

"Sure. It was a hot day. But the guy on second blocked the base like it was home plate. My buddies said so."

"How much were you drinking?" I asked.

"I can't remembers, but it couldn't have been much; I still remember the pain."

"Have you ever been on the wagon?" I asked.

Now his face really lit up. "Lots of times. I can quit any time I want to. A year ago Betsy was bugging me, so I quit for 30 days – no problem."

"Have any of your friends stopped drinking?" I asked.

"Last year Harry quit. We thought he got religion, but when I ran into him by accident later, I was surprised. He wasn't religious at all. He said he got treatment. Said he didn't miss the booze. He looked real good." Looking somewhat subdued, Bob added "it made me wonder about myself for a minute."

"How is Harry now?" I wondered.

"He still works in our shop. I hear he got promoted. Somehow, I don't see him much anymore."

"Have any of your drinking buddies died?" was my next questions.

"Last year we lost Fred," he recalled. "But that was because of a liver problem . . . from the war."

“Liver damage means it’s time to get treatment so you can stop drinking,” I explained. “If Fred . . .”

“Well, in a case like that – maybe you’re right, doctor. Fred might still be around if he could have quit.”

“Bob, your tests show that you have liver damage too.”

“You mean the booze could be getting to me?” he asked, wide-eyed.

I decided to shift the conversation back to Bob’s “friendly” visitors and their booze. “Sometimes your best friends are unable to help, especially if they have the same problem” I said.

I told him about reading a biography of the late comedian W. C. Fields by his mistress, Carlota Monti. In her book “W.C. Fields and Me,” Monti writes: “During his sickness, I kept arguing with his friends, begging them not to bring him liquor. With the medication he was taking, it was both tortuous and dangerous for him to drink. Despite my precautions, they still smuggled in the bottles.”

Bob smiled sardonically. “Boy, they were friends to the end,” he said, then stared out the window, subdued.

“Bob, we’re out of time. I want Betsy to be here when I see you tomorrow. And Harry from the plant, too.”

“I can’t say that I’m crazy about your idea, Doc. Can I ask some of drinking buddies to come?”

I shrugged. “Sure, but I don’t think they’ll come.”

“Why wouldn’t they, Doc?” Bob asked.

“They might be too nervous.” I replied. What I was really thinking was, “Why does baloney shun the slicer?” But I thought better of saying that.

Dr. Pursch’s Office
949-499-5631

© 2003 Joseph Pursch, MD
www.drpursch.com
