

Letters

Bill W., Cofounder of Alcoholics Anonymous, and Vitamin B₃

International Doctors in Alcoholics Anonymous (IDAA) was featured in an article in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 146:1012,1991. This account reminded me of my occasional contact with members of IDAA and my frequent contacts with Mr. Bill W. starting in 1960.

Bill became interested in our research in Saskatchewan. We were investigating niacin as a treatment for schizophrenia, for schizophrenics who were also alcoholics, and as a substance which lowered cholesterol levels. We used what we thought were effective doses of this vitamin, then considered extremely large, with four prospective double-blind controlled experiments beginning in 1952. It is ironic that these controlled experiments were not followed by any general acceptance of our findings that this vitamin was very useful, while our preliminary uncontrolled work with niacin and cholesterol was rather quickly accepted, and niacin is today one of the effective substances for lowering cholesterol levels.

Members of IDAA will find the following account of Bill's involvement in megavitamin therapy using niacin interesting. When I first met Bill in 1960 he was very uncomfortable from severe tension, fatigue and chronic insomnia. After listening to Dr. H. Osmond and I discuss our work, he wanted to try out niacin for himself. He started to take 1 gram three times per day after meals. Two weeks later he was free of these symptoms and remained well until he died from emphysema. After several months, when he was certain he would remain well, he persuaded thirty of his AA friends to take the same amount of niacin. Three months later he concluded that one-third were relieved of similar symptoms in one month, another third in two months, and the remaining third not at all. Because of his great concern for members of AA who were forced to drop out because of severe discomfort during their sobriety, he wanted to explore the limits to niacin's use for AA members in general. He was not able to enlist the cooperation of the members of the International Board in New York and therefore turned to IDAA members for help. One of these

members was to a large degree instrumental in shaping the study known as the Coronary Drug Study, wherein niacin was examined as a hypocholesterolemic compound and which was later found to decrease mortality and increase life span by two years.

In order to arouse their interest, Bill prepared three reports which were distributed only to physicians (Bill W, 1968). He also asked me whether I would be willing to speak to the IDAA at their annual meeting. For a number of years they had invited Bill to come to their meeting and address them. He had not previously accepted their invitation because he had greatly restricted his public appearances, in order to decrease his own role in AA in deference to the principle of anonymity and because of his belief that AA was beginning to give him God-like status. This time he agreed to come, but only on condition that they would invite me as well. They were so keen to hear Bill they would have invited anyone and put up with them in order to have Bill there. That spring we met in a motel on the Indianapolis Speedway.

After Bill's address which I found fascinating, I outlined the gist of our niacin studies, especially with alcoholics. The IDAA then appointed a committee of five physicians who were to examine our claims and report back to their next meeting. The members of the committee began to treat large numbers of their alcoholic patients with niacin and finally reported back to the committee. This started the slow and gradual introduction of niacin into the treatment programs of a number of institutions.

Bill W. did not think that the terms niacin or nicotinic acid would be very appealing, and he asked me whether there was any other term that might be used. I then informed him that niacin was the third water soluble vitamin to be discovered. It had been classed as vitamin B₃ by Prof. Roger Manning at the University of Saskatchewan, who taught first year biochemistry. Bill thought vitamin B₃ would be much more appealing. He titled his manuscripts "The Vitamin B₃ Therapy". Since then, this has become the standard term for both niacin and niacinamide. This was another of Bill's contributions to medical science. Bill's

reports were widely circulated to physicians as well as to lay members of AA, even though they were meant only for medical eyes. One member of AA in Texas had over a thousand copies printed and distributed in the state of Texas. (I do not think that the incidence of alcoholism in Texas is any lower as a result.) I find it difficult to believe that Bill would have asked IDAA to break the anonymity of its members. He would

more likely have invited the organization to distribute copies of his reports to their membership. He received sympathetic support from members of IDAA. In my contacts with the members I have found them to be open-minded, resourceful, and interested in new ideas. Perhaps we all need a good dose of suffering to reinforce our own humanity.

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