

Behind closed doors

When I started I had a drinking problem my husband embled the house for proof. He found evidence in the roof, under the eaves, in the roof, under the eaves, in the roof, under the eaves...

enny is describing her secret world, one she shares with a growing band of women who drink to excess. Just how large that group is remains unknown. Few studies have been done in the area of women and alcohol. Epidemiologic data neglects the attributes of women as a group separate from the total population. Data on women's drinking patterns is confined to a handful of epidemiologic studies — for more research is required before the full extent of the problem is understood.

The complete picture is known to be too easy to overlook. Drinking is a harmless pastime, drinking is a harmless pastime, drinking is a harmless pastime, drinking is a harmless pastime...

Women with serious drinking problems have compounded this indifference by denying that they have a problem. They don't want to be labeled as alcoholics, therefore, they resort to subtle tactics because they feel alone with their problem and lacking support.

This neglect of female drinkers has been identified in a soon-to-be-published report commissioned by the Victorian Health Promotions Foundation. The author of the report, Dr. Ian Mackenzie, says that while women's consumption of alcohol is equal to men's, they assume the same proportions.

Any predictions of future trends in Australia is handicapped by the inadequacy of data available. The widespread trend of women's drinking may be underestimated because detection is more likely in the workplace, and women who get drunk in an unstructured environment, like Dr. Mackenzie said.

It is suspected that women's overall lower consumption of alcohol may be deceptive because they may use other legal drugs like tranquilizers at higher rates than men.

A 1983 report from the National Council on Alcohol and Drug Abuse revealed that 40 percent of women over 40 have used minor tranquilizers while overseas studies show that tranquilizer use is higher among alcoholics than for the general population.

Separate surveys in NSW, South Australia and Western Australia between 1981 and 1985 have shown that the number of women drinking at "hazardous" levels is increasing.

Women drink, many to excess. But just how many remains unknown. HARRY BLITSTEIN and CAROLYN WORTH report on society's hidden alcoholics and find few programs targeted to women's specific needs.

over the past 10 years, with a total of 11.2 per cent of female drinkers consuming at levels classified by the National Health and Medical Research Council as "hazardous" or "harmful". The Western Australian study found that more than one in four male drinkers consumed alcohol at problem levels, compared with one in six female drinkers.

While the average age of women with drinking problems is higher than for men, there is a disturbing trend of heavy drinking by young women. Studies show that young women are recognizing their binge drinking as a problem in their lives.

A Western Australian study found that in the 10 years up to 1985, young women in the 15-24 age group had increased their alcohol consumption by 15 per cent.

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education doctors have received until recently. The director of community medicine at Melbourne's St. Vincent's Hospital, Dr. Greg Whelan, agrees: "When I was an undergraduate, most GPs thought of alcoholics as a special group that ended most of the alcohol patients we saw were men who had been hospitalized."

As women visit their family doctors more often than men, it is expected that GPs are well-versed in the detection and treatment of alcohol-related problems.

Associate Professor Margaret Blumfield, involved in developing courses for the medical students of the University of Melbourne, says that general medical graduates still have a way to go in satisfactorily identifying and responding to alcohol-related problems among their women patients.

"We have detection instruments that are not gender specific, and are based predominantly on our experience with men. It is possible that some additional

fact that many doctors in general practice share this ignorance. A survey of Sydney doctors conducted in May 1989 by Ann Roche, director of the early intervention unit at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital's Centre for Drug and Alcohol Studies, revealed that 41 per cent of respondents considered the patient to be the main cause for men and women.

The finding that over a quarter of doctors were only prepared to intervene after women were drinking more than four drinks a day, which has been generally accepted as potentially harmful, is a matter of concern and surprise," the survey found.

This ignorance among the medical profession is symptomatic of the poor mental balance and may be linked to a higher incidence of breast cancer. The medical establishment has been slow to take note of the gender differences between men and women.

Certainly of greater concern is the fact that many doctors in general practice share this ignorance. A survey of Sydney doctors conducted in May 1989 by Ann Roche, director of the early intervention unit at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital's Centre for Drug and Alcohol Studies, revealed that 41 per cent of respondents considered the patient to be the main cause for men and women.

or different questions for women, such as looking for a history of family violence and seeing more women who are in the high-risk category," says Professor Hamilton. The Victorian Health Department recognized that women needed special attention when it appointed Donna Ribbin-Turner as director of women's programs in 1991.

One of the problems is that existing treatment programs are aimed at our experience with men who have been in treatment. We haven't had enough attention to whether programs based on experience with men are also appropriate for women. Women are telling us that they are not (appropriate) and are staying away from programs.

There are obvious things that help in the way of availability of counselling, greater access to female counsellors. Self-help groups, of which Alcoholics Anonymous is the best known, provide an avenue for help. But for many women feel uncomfortable in being with their problems in front of men.

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