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ALCOHOLISM: A NEW DEFINITION

A new definition of alcoholism, which simplifies the characteristics that are essential to alcoholism, has been developed by the joint National Council on Alcoholism/American Medical Society on Alcoholism Committee on Definitions. *Approved 6/16/76.*

"This definition," according to Dr. Frank Seixas, ~~medical director of the National Council on Alcoholism,~~ "may lead to significant progress both in the treatment of alcoholism and in the evaluation of success of that treatment, by separating individuals with single non-recurring problems due to the usual pharmacological action of alcohol, from those whose dependence on alcohol has changed the reaction of their brain to the drug, putting them in the position of suffering from a potentially fatal disease for which active treatment is essential."

Published in the Annals of Internal Medicine (December, 1976, issue), the definition reads:

Alcoholism is a chronic, progressive and potentially fatal disease. It is characterized by tolerance and physical dependency, pathologic organ changes, or both, all of which are the direct consequences of the alcohol ingested.

- or indirect*
1. "Chronic and progressive" means that physical, emotional and social changes that develop are cumulative and progress as drinking continues;
 2. "Tolerance" means brain adaptation to the presence of high concentration of alcohol;
 3. "Physical dependency" means that withdrawal symptoms occur from decreasing or ceasing consumption of alcohol;
 4. The person with alcoholism cannot consistently predict on any drinking occasion the duration of the episode or the quantity that will be consumed;
 5. Pathologic organ changes can be found in almost any organ, but most often involve the liver, brain, peripheral nervous system and the gastrointestinal tract;
 6. The drinking pattern is generally continuous but may be intermittent, with periods of abstinence between episodes;
 7. The social, emotional and behavioral consequences of alcoholism result from the effects of alcohol on the functions of the brain. The degree to which these symptoms and signs are considered deviant will depend upon the cultural norms of the society or group in which the person lives.

"The medical-scientific community has long sought a definition of alcoholism which clearly delineated the essential characteristics of the disease", said Dr. Seixas. "We believe we have such a definition."