Three International Conferences Report on Alcoholism Research

Tokyo: Metabolism

Three special lectures on alcohol metabolism were featured at the International Medical Symposium on Alcohol and Drug Dependence, held in Tokyo and Kyoto August 21-26. The conference was sponsored by the Japanese Medical Society of Alcohol Studies in cooperation with the International Council on Alcohol and Addictions.

C.S. Lieber of the Bronx VA Hospital and Mt. Sinai School of Medicine gave a special lecture on the hepatic and metabolic complications of alcoholism. For prevention he suggested a three-level screening: (1) detection of heavy drinkers based on elevation of plasma alpha amino-n-butyric acid, (2) detection of liver injury with necrosis and inflammation based on a rise of serum glutamic dehydrogenase activity, and (3) detection of alcoholics prone to develop cirrhosis by the finding of pericentral sclerosis in liver biopsy.

In another special lecture, J.-P. von Warburg of Berne, Switzerland, asked whether sensitivity to alcohol is a pharmacogenetic problem. He proposed that individuals with an isoenzyme pattern containing much "atypical" subunit B may attain higher peak levels of circulating acetaldehyde and therefore more often experience adverse effects after consuming alcohol in a way similar to the disulfiram-induced hypersensitivity. It is conceivable, he said, that people with different racial backgrounds have adapted socio-culturally over the centuries to differential biological responses by modulating alcohol consumption.

Olaf Fersander of the Research Laboratories of the State Alcohol Monopoly of Finland, in the final special lecture, described the influence of ethanol metabolism in the liver. Other reports from the conference follow:

- W. Feuerlein et al. of the Max-Planck Institute for Psychiatry in Munich described a diagnostic instrument based on the NCA criteria for the diagnosis of alcoholism called the Munich Alcoholism Test (MAT) which consists of two parts: a 7-item physicians' assessment part and a 24-item self-assessment part. In a cross-validation study on 675 patients indicate a high incidence of cerebral changes, said Hans Bergman, et al. of Karolinska Hospital, Stockholm.

Honolulu: Psychiatry

The VI World Congress of Psychiatry, held in Honolulu August 28-September 3, received worldwide attention for its vote to condemn the Soviet Union for its practice of treating political dissidents as mental patients. However, the main work of the Congress was scientific reports, and prominent among them were papers on alcoholism.

- Twin studies reporting on genetic differences in the response of the EEG to centrally acting drugs, especially alcohol, were reported by Peter Propping of the Institute of Human Genetics, Heidelberg, West Germany. The variability of the normal human resting EEG is nearly totally genetically determined. An ingested psychotropic drug therefore interacts with a genetically determined trait.

- The importance of time-place relationships in alcoholism treatment were stressed by George Deering, M.D., Michael Gotkin, c.F.H.D., and Edward Mason, M.D., of the University of Massachusetts Medical School. By chronologically reconstructing an individual's previous TIME-PLACE interactions a patient will be better able to remember the positive place experiences, associated with feelings such as dignity, love, security, and confidence.

- Although the per capita alcohol consumption among the Chinese is rather high, social and psychiatric problems related to alcohol abuse and alcoholism are low, said Winston W. Shen, M.D., of Tulane University School of Medicine. The rarity of alcoholism among the Chinese may be due to the fact that alcohol consumption is integrated into the Chinese culture in a healthful way: solitary drinking is rare, alcohol is taken with large meals, alcoholic beverages are accepted as a food or medicine, public drunkenness is condemned. However, opium abuse is far more prevalent.

- Results from a pilot study using computerized tomography and psychometric performance to assess the brain of alcoholic patients indicate a high incidence of cerebral changes, said Hans Bergman, et al. of Karolinska Hospital, Stockholm.

- A significant number of crimes of violence committed under the influence of alcohol.

Dresden: Treatment

Many speakers from Eastern Europe presented significant work among the 100 papers on alcoholism given at the 23rd International Institute on the Prevention and Treatment of Alcoholism held at Dresden in East Germany June 6-10. The conference was sponsored by the International Council on Alcohol and Addictions.

- J. Morawski and S. Kowacki of Poland outlined the role of criminal law in combating alcoholism. Two groups of norms are significant: the first aimed at general prevention (penalties for violating standards of production, distribution, and consumption of alcoholic beverages and serving alcohol to minors), the second aimed at individual prevention (penalties for misconduct and crimes committed under the influence of alcohol).

- L. Kubicka and J. Skala of the Apollinaris Centre in Prague reported on a three-year follow-up study comparing six weeks with thirteen weeks in patient programs. At one-year follow-up the unmarried long-stay patients did better than the unmarried short-stay patients, whereas the difference between the married short- and long-stay patients was nonsignificant. Three-year follow-up results again showed no difference between the short- and long-stay groups in general, but the interaction effect of marital status and treatment duration was also observed, though to a smaller degree.

- Isam H. Sherbini described the Islamic experience of prohibition, which was not just a Quranic order but part of a comprehensive approach to remodeling society, based on religion, involving all aspects of everyday life. It was achieved mainly by teaching, preaching, and convincing every individual to participate in the change. He stressed the role of leaders setting standards of behavior by example; in today's society, this would mean conducting diplomacy and government without intoxicants.

- R. Teschke, A. Brand, and G. Strohmeyer of West Germany reported on studies with rats that showed that early alterations of the liver due to chronic alcohol consumption are associated with increased serum GGT activity.
Alcoholism and coronary heart disease

The report in the New England Journal of Medicine (August 25, 1977) of a prospective study of Japanese men living in Hawaii studied first in 1965-68 and followed for about ten years is of major importance to the alcoholism field. This work by Drs. Yano, Rhoads, and Kagan is the second such report (the first by Dr. Klatsky of Kaiser-Permanente) which has indicated a "protective" effect of moderate amounts of alcohol in the mild consequences of coronary heart disease, myocardial infarction, and death as compared to abstinent men and women.

These findings are welcome as an opportunity to reiterate the position that students of alcoholism have consistently been credited with: the general population, and not blind to scientific data. Evidence presented in the report is consistent with this position.

This study tends to show that at the heavy drinking end of the scale mortality and morbidity again increased, but the number of subjects admitting to heavy drinking was too small for firm conclusions. The parameters of the study were such that denial among active alcoholics, while it might have been present, would have been unlikely to materially distort the figures for the remaining sample. Thus we can take the conclusions seriously.

Of course, among alcoholics other cardiac pathologies such as cardiomyopathy and arrhythmias make the alcoholism the most pressing problem to treat. Even if we did not consider the host of physical, psychological, and social morbidities which accompany them. We also must emphasize the need for an individual to be wary as to how he evaluates his own drinking—many alcoholics have believed they were "moderate" drinkers for years after their peers were convinced otherwise.

However, the study should not be used as a rationalization to encourage recovered alcoholics to return to drinking. There was no indication that lifelong teetotalers had different consequences from those who stepped drinking, but the clues seemed to be in but have less consistently been credited with: the general population, and not blind to scientific data. Evidence presented in the report is consistent with this position.

MEETINGS

NOVEMBER 30—Deadline for submission of papers for Fourth International Conference on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, to be held in Liverpool, April 9-14, 1978. For more information, write The Conference Secretaries, B15 The Temple, Dale Street, Liverpool L2 5 RU, England.

APRIL 28-MAY 3—National Alcoholism Forum, St. Louis, Mo. AMSA-NSA Medical-Scientific sessions starting April 30. Meetings at St. Louis Gateway Convention and Exhibition Center. For information, write Dr. Frank A. Seixas, NCA, 733 Third Avenue, New York City, NY 10017.

BOOKS


The proceedings of the Third International conference on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, held in Liverpool in 1976.


The first handbook to cover all the daily rights alcoholics have and don't have in such areas as divorce, contracts, marriage, wills, criminal law, confidentiality, immigration and citizenship, treatment, employment, health and life insurance, and so on.
World Congress of Psychiatry Reports
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The improvements among alcoholics exceeded those among other diagnoses.

• Data from the American Psychiatric Association Task Force on Suicide Prevention presented by Matthew Ross, M.D. of the University of California, Irvine, showed that physician suicide rates are higher than among matched populations; suicide among male physicians is higher than among male physicians in general populations, and even matched populations; there is a high incidence of psychiatric morbidity, alcoholism, and drug abuse among physicians who commit suicide.

• In comparing alcohol use among opiate addicts in Iran and the United States, M.A. Shamie, M.D. et al. of the National Iranian Society for Rehabilitation of the Disabled found that 98% of the American addicts used alcohol, with 40% having severe problems, while only 25% of the Iranian addicts used alcohol. Religious and social variables probably account for the difference.

• A unique syndrome, found only in the region of La Paz, Bolivia, was reported by Cesar A. Fabiani, M.D. of La Paz, and Edward F. Frank, M.D., of the University of Pennsylvania. The Bolivian alcoholic pseudotetany, known locally as "tis-ta-pis" or "shrinkin, is a syndrome resembling tetany with painful spasms and fasciculations of the muscles of the upper limbs accompanied by intense fear and anxiety. It occurs in about 10% of chronic alcoholics as well as episodic heavy drinkers. Symptoms are relieved through the administration of intravenous MgSO4.

• A study of the state criminal records and official registers of alcoholics in Sweden showed that there is a genetic explanation for the development of alcoholism but not for the manifestation of criminality.

• Tests on alcoholic heroin addicts treated with disulfiram and methadone concurrently suggested no contraindications to this combined pharmacological treatment, said Charles V. Charuvastha, M.D., of the Brownwood VA Hospital in Los Angeles.

• Depo-neuroleptics, mainly fluphenazine and pimozid, are used in treatment of chronic alcoholism. P.A. Lambert of Charney, France, reported the injections are given every two, three, or four weeks, and the results are satisfactory and sometimes spectacular. However, Lambert underlined that the DN action is only part of a therapeutic program.

• Age is perhaps the most important determinant in the diagnosis of alcoholism, reported Demmie G. Mayfield, M.D. et al. of Brown University Medical School. They studied psychiatric patients admitted to two Providence hospitals representing different delivery systems but having common staff. In the age range 19-24 only 20% of patients with alcohol problems were diagnosed alcoholic, while in the age range 55-64, 68% were diagnosed.

Treatment, Diagnosis Reports from Dresden
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Further reports from Tokyo Medical Symposium (Continued from page 1)

unselected in-and outpatients a validity of r. = 94 was obtained, and the reliability of the self-assessment part was r. = .84.

• Taurine (2-aminoethanesulfonic acid) was tested by Shoji Saito, Masanori Akiyama, and Kazuhito Kawata of Nihon University School of Medicine in Tokyo to determine its ability to suppress an ethanol withdrawal convulsion. Using male ICR mice, the team found that the simultaneous injection of 80 mg/kg taurine was very effective and was associated with scarcely any convulsions in comparison to controls.

• Reporting on the problem of "alcoholic epilepsy," Hideo Yamane, M.D. et al. of the Kyoto Prefectural University of Medicine suggested that although in the majority of cases the syndrome is part of a withdrawal syndrome, there are still some unresolved questions about the relationship between alcohol and seizure. Whether alcohol can provoke a seizure has not yet been definitely demonstrated. He described one case in which a man developed epileptic seizures while drinking 900 ml of sake.

• Basketball introduced as a method for group recreation therapy in the Senogawa Hospital in Hiroshima resulted in increased strength after five to six months, according to Ichiro Tsukue, Takao Shohoji, and Kazuhiro Nakagawa. A group of male schizophrenics were introduced to a similar program for comparison. At the time the program was begun there was no statistical difference in physical build between the two groups but the alcoholics were superior in such items of basic physical strength as back muscle and grip strength, but inferior in agility. The alcoholics showed more recovery of coordination than the schizophrenics after basketball therapy.

• The Danshukai, or Japanese Alcoholics Abstinence Society, is a widespread organization formed in 1966. Its history was presented by H. Suwaki, M.D. of Okayama University Medical School. The society has no religious or political connections, and most members attend meetings with their wives. The activities are not anonymous, and the members have a close connection with a medical institution and a psychiatrist. Danshukai is based on a master-disciple relationship between the head of the society and its members, and is a hierarchical organization. A pseudo-familial organization, the members form a close-knit fraternity.

• Kimie Hatayama et al. of the Faculty of Medicine, Shinshu University, reported that the incidence of chronic alcoholic pancreatitis in Japan has increased four times in the past ten years. He described 46 cases, all but two of them males. The onset of the disease occurred at a mean age of 41, after 19 years of alcohol abuse. Diabetes was present in 50% of the cases examined.

PHYSICIAN'S ALCOHOL NEWSLETTER
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RESEARCH AND REVIEW

Hypertension a risk for even moderate drinkers

A link between drinking and hypertension was found in a four-year study of nearly 84,000 California patients, members of the Kaiser-Permanente health care center. The study was conducted by a team of epidemiologists led by Arthur L. Klatsky, M.D. People who take even three drinks daily run a significantly higher risk of developing hypertension, the leading cause of strokes and heart disease. The three-drink threshold occurred no matter what type of alcoholic beverage was consumed. However, persons who took only one or two drinks a day did not show a higher rate of hypertension than non-drinkers, and the risk may even be lower. (New England Journal of Medicine, May 26, 1977.)

Alcohol and blood lipids linked in cooperative study

Data from five study populations (Albany, Evans County, Framingham, Honolulu, and San Francisco) participating in the Cooperative Lipoprotein Phenotyping Study indicate strong relations between alcohol consumption and blood-lipids. Alcohol consumption was positively associated with high-density-lipoprotein cholesterol level in all populations, the lipid level appearing to be a graded response even over the low levels of alcohol consumption reported. Less strong but consistently negative correlations were found with low-density-lipoprotein cholesterol. Plasma-triglycerides showed a modest positive correlation with alcohol. (The Lancet, July 23, 1977, pp. 153-55.)