

# About AA

## For Students at a College in Philadelphia, An A.A. Meeting Is Part of Their Course Work

Students at Drexel University College of Medicine in Philadelphia attend an open meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous and write a report on the experience as part of their course work. They are escorted to the meetings, usually in groups of three or four, by a local A.A. member volunteer. The students include those studying medicine and nursing, in addition to those in physician assistant courses and healthcare profession studies.

The aim is to make them aware of the A.A. program as a resource for the problem drinkers they will very likely encounter in their professional lives.

The work is coordinated between individual professors at the school and a committee of A.A. members who are volunteers. This past academic year, about 300 students were escorted to A.A. meetings under the program.

Dennis H. Novack, MD, associate dean of Medical Education at Drexel and director of the Physicians and Patients program, says, "I run a first-year course that teaches self-awareness and the ways unexplored attitudes and biases by healthcare providers can affect treatment of their patients. And alcoholism, because it is so prevalent, warrants special attention."

Students too often harbor misconceptions about alcoholism, he says. "I would like them to understand that alcoholism is a disease and deserves treatment and not moral judgment," says Dr. Novack. "Doctors are as prone as those in the general population to think of alcoholism as a matter of willpower, or lack of. It is also important they understand at least a little about alcoholism from the perspective of the alcoholic."

### A Different Type of Patient

Dealing with problem drinkers is not necessarily the same as dealing with other patients, he says. "The alcoholic may not be very quick to talk about his problem, so it's important for a doctor to be able to pick up on the cues that they may be dealing with someone suffering from alcohol abuse," says Dr. Novack.

Robert J. Chapman, PhD, a clinical assistant professor of behavioral health counseling at Drexel University College of Nursing and Health Professions, says that in his first year working in the addiction field in the 1970s a couple of A.A. members paid him a visit and extended an invitation to an open A.A. meeting.

"I went, wore a suit and tie, didn't know what to expect, and I was blown away," says Dr. Chapman. "Since then I've attended hundreds of meetings. I have kept going because I get an insight into alcoholism and addiction that I don't see anywhere else."

When he started teaching 20 years ago, Dr. Chapman encouraged his students to attend A.A. meetings or those of another

Twelve Step program. "Now I make it a requirement," he says. "I like them to go to at least a couple of meetings. Then we discuss their experiences in class. Some have trouble with the God part of the program, and for them I point out that in A.A. God can stand for 'good orderly direction.'"

Dr. Chapman believes that his students, when they become nurses, are going to be better able to help their patients who have drinking problems as a result of having attended meetings. "They are going to be able to talk about A.A. from first-hand experience, not something they got from a book or a movie," he says. "You can't beat the price and it's probably the best education a student can get on the subject."

"Any medical person dealing with a patient on the road to a big problem with drinking is going to be able spot it much quicker if they have heard the stories of alcoholics in recovery," says Dr. Chapman.

One student reflecting on the experience noted the "deep discussion" at the A.A. meeting, adding: "It was apparent that A.A. was not a bunch of used-to-be drunks attending meetings to fulfill a court mandate, as I, and probably others, somewhat expected."

Another student admitted that her only idea of A.A. had come from television and the movies, and that "never before had I understood how going to meetings could somehow help someone stop drinking."

### Two-Hour Sessions on A.A.

Each academic year at Drexel Medical includes "A.A. Small Group Sessions," in which A.A. members give talks to groups of students in the health professions at the school about Alcoholics Anonymous. During these two-hour sessions, an A.A. member delivers a talk on A.A., its history, what it does and what it doesn't do. This is followed by another A.A. telling their story, which is followed by a question-and-answer period.

According to Dr. Novack, "these sessions are very powerful, partly because the stories are dramatic. It's also that the average A.A. member has been to hell and back and has garnered knowledge about life, not just about alcoholism."

The local A.A. Cooperation With the Professional Community (C.P.C.) committee does the work of lining up A.A. members to escort the students to meetings and also provides speakers for the Small Group Sessions.

"At the beginning of each semester Drexel supplies us with a master list of school e-mail addresses for the students," says Frank W., an A.A. member and director of the C.P.C. committee.

"We divide up the e-mails among the committee members and each contacts a certain number to get the ball rolling on choosing a convenient time and place to take them to a meeting," says Frank, who is sober in A.A. for 13 years.

## What to Expect at the Meeting

“We explain that we will be attending an *open* meeting, which means any interested party is welcome as an observer and that they should not feel like an outsider or that they are encroaching on some private event,” says Frank.

“We tell the students in a general way what to expect in the meeting. For instance, the chairperson will ask ‘is there anyone here for the first time,’ but that they are not to respond, since it’s directed at A.A. members.

“When we are with the students we take seats toward the back of the room, and we ask that they not take notes. And when the basket is passed around, that they should not put any money into it because A.A. is strictly self-supporting and that we don’t accept money from anyone not an A.A. member. They learn a lot by going to just one meeting,” says Frank.

“We all get e-mails from the students after we’ve taken them to meetings telling us how it opened their eyes, how so much of it was unexpected,” says Frank. “We get e-mails and thank you cards from them all the time expressing their thanks. They seem genuinely touched by the experience.”

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## A Medical Administrator Is A.A.’s Newest Nonalcoholic Trustee

Of the 21 trustees serving on A.A.’s General Service Board, seven are termed Class A (nonalcoholic) trustees, chosen for service in A.A. because they often have professional or business backgrounds and experience that are useful to the Fellowship as it carries out its business, communicates with the outside world, and carries the message of recovery to the suffering alcoholic. According to the board’s bylaws, there are two basic requirements for a Class A trustee. The first, obviously, is that the candidate not be an alcoholic. The second is that the candidate has a profound faith in the A.A. program of recovery.

Terrance M. Bedient, of Albany, New York, A.A.’s newest Class A trustee, has such a profound faith. First introduced to A.A. in 1975 when he was in charge of an employee assistance program, Terrance attended his first open A.A. meeting more than 30 years ago. There he became very good friends with “a couple of guys in recovery who swore by A.A.” and began the long association that brought him to A.A.’s General Service Board, an association, he claims, that has benefited him in many ways.

“The spirituality of A.A. is so rich,” says Terry. “I am fulfilled in my own spirit by contact with those who have suffered things much more serious than I and have grasped the Steps and Traditions, and made a life for themselves.”

## Years in the Field

Terry, as he is known to friends and colleagues, brings to the board many years of experience in the medical field. “My entire career has been working in medical administration, working around people with acute and chronic illnesses,” he says. “It’s refreshing to see

those in A.A. embracing practices and principles to be healthy.”

Terry’s career in medical administration began as an army officer. After discharge, he completed graduate school and was appointed assistant administrator and risk manager at Beekman Downtown Hospital in Manhattan. From 1984-1996, Terry headed Myers Community Hospital in the Rochester exurb of Sodus, New York. Appointed by New York Chief Judge Judith Kaye in 1999 to serve on the Commission on Alcohol and Substance Abuse in the Legal Profession, Terry served for three years as a charter board member of the Lawyers Assistance Trust, an independent statewide entity that oversees substance abuse programs for attorneys and judges in New York State.

Currently, Terry is vice president of the Medical Society of New York and director of the Committee for Physician Health, an organization dedicated to providing confidential assistance to physicians suffering from substance use or other psychiatric disorders. Recognized and supported by the New York State Department of Health to help physicians, residents and fellows, medical students and physician assistants, the committee monitors the treatment and clinical practice of program participants and provides advocacy and support as well as outreach activities, including prevention and education.

Terry, who succeeds Vincent E. Keefe as Class A trustee and treasurer of the A.A. General Service Board, is familiar with the workings of A.A., having served as a consultant to the trustee’s Finance and Budgetary Committee.

With a baccalaureate degree in music, a master’s degree in counseling psychology, and a post graduate degree in hospital administration from George Washington University in Washington, D.C., Terry is uniquely qualified to speak of A.A.’s principles to other professionals.

The Class A trustees serve six-year terms and the Class B trustees serve four-year terms. Their job is to be current with everything happening inside and outside A.A. that may affect the health and growth of the Fellowship.

A vital group with varying areas of expertise, A.A.’s Class A (nonalcoholic) trustees have always provided the Fellowship with critical service. Importantly, they can do certain things the 14 Class B (alcoholic) trustees can’t do, such as facing the camera head-on or using their last names without violating the Traditions and principles of anonymity that are designed to keep A.A. members out of the public eye.

“In the days when A.A. was unknown,” wrote A.A. co-founder Bill W. in the Fellowship’s monthly magazine, the A.A. Grapevine (January 1966), “it was the nonalcoholic trustees who held up our hands before the general public . . . Their very presence on our board was quite able to command full confidence and the respect of many faraway groups. Meanwhile, they assured the world around us of A.A.’s worth. These are the unusual services which indeed they still render.”

## Let Us Hear From You . . .

Are there specific topics you would like to see explored in *About A.A.*? Please send us your thoughts, ideas, comments, so we may better communicate with the professional community. You can e-mail the Cooperation With the Professional Community desk at: [cpc@aa.org](mailto:cpc@aa.org).

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