

## **The Perception of Alcoholics Anonymous in the UK**

It is my hope that by this article, and others by my colleagues, will change the perception of Alcoholics Anonymous, especially in the referring agencies, so that interventions can be made more often, earlier, and with more confidence.

The findings of Keith Humphreys, a research professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Stanford Medical School, California, are recently being more widely acknowledged. They show that AA is more effective in helping people, and at a lower cost than previously thought. AA is entirely self-funding; there is no cost to the state. AA accepts no external donations.

I have been a Non-Alcoholic Trustee (NAT) of AA Great Britain for 18 months, with three other NATs - two psychiatrists and one clinical psychologist working with people with serious drinking problems.

Becoming a NAT was leap of faith for me. The academic literature of the time of my MSc (Substance Misuse) course in 2006 was largely suspicious of AA, mainly because of a lack of statistics about membership and outcomes.

The Non-Alcoholic Trustees provide balance to the General Service Board of AA, and help get the message out about AA in a way that members perhaps cannot. Their Traditions state that members need always maintain anonymity at the level of Press, radio and films.

The medical profession finds it difficult to access the language of AA. This was borne out recently in my interview to teach in a medical school in Sussex. When I asked the direct question to the course conveners what was their impression of AA, the answer contained the words "cultish" and "religiosity" - both anathema to a fast paced medical degree course. My interview was successful; I hope to run a course there next year.

The image of AA in America appears to be more positive than it is in the UK. However, that is changing with the UK National Treatment Agency showing intentions to engage with AA much more. The economic climate is perhaps encouraging more creative solutions to our national drinking problems.

The board and trustee structure is a revelation of good sense. AA is made up of autonomous groups nationwide, 4312 groups in Great Britain. Some members of these groups form Intergroups, and then are represented by 16 regions at board and trustee level.

Board members, one from each region, are proposed, and if accepted by the nominations committee, serve as a board member for a maximum of four years, never to return. This is called rotation and is a cornerstone of the whole attitude of AA, that no fellow can become dominant.

The board acts as trusted servants of the members of AA, guided by an annual conference of delegates representing the groups. Imagine an upside down triangle- the board is at the bottom.

After going to some AA meetings and also talking at length and in depth to fellow members of the board and other fellows of AA, it has become clear to me that the fellowship of AA consists of many beliefs, including atheists and agnostics. The religious words in the Twelve Steps are interpreted as a framework for change. The finesse of belief and choice are hardly uppermost in the minds of the people who need help.

The reason that the words in the Twelve Steps endure without being changed is simply that they have proved over time to be very successful. They are not broke so do not fix them. It is intuitively understood that the words may be from a different era, a religious time in a religious country, but the core meaning endures.

An important core meaning is that the problem can be “given up” to a higher authority. When someone “gives up” a problem, and that can be to a god, that act frees one for change. This is a very powerful thing to be able to do.

Professor Chris Frith has demonstrated by experimentation that we make better snap decisions without thinking about them - the brain functions well subconsciously with the information having streamed in from “outside”. At a recent meeting with him I posed a “collective agency” as a possible higher entity. Prof. Frith clarified that our actions may be strongly and unconsciously influenced by other people, and this collective form of agency may be stronger than our own agency. Agency meaning the perception of being the cause of

the outcomes of our actions. Religion is one way of enhancing collective agency but not the only one.

The next most powerful component, in my estimation, is that AA members have been in exactly, or something like, the position of the newcomer. The empathy between recovering alcoholics and people with drinking problems is huge - no member of AA can declare someone else an alcoholic. That is a decision each person must make individually.

A professional in the NHS or community worker can rarely match these factors. There is no “them and us” in AA. The fellows really are in it together. They speak each other’s language. The care worker is often the first link in the path to recovery, a vital link to a secure future.

There are many and regular AA meetings everywhere, the help is free to the sufferer, and to the State. No wonder that the fellowship in Great Britain has grown from 2 people in 1946 to more than 50,000 at present. Millions of people have been set free from alcohol all over the world.

The underlying stability of AA is achieved by the recovering alcoholic reaching out to the still suffering drinker; this simple act reinforces his or her own sobriety.

I can now see the difference between casual drinkers and drinkers of other hues, light, heavy or problem drinkers. Most people who join AA just cannot control the amount of alcohol taken.

I do not see sickness at board level in AA and in the people I have met who belong to the fellowship. I see health. I see people who have got off the hook. I see functioning, loving families. I see people who in many ways have beat the awful system that sees drinking alcohol as the norm. AA gives you permission not to drink. And that is rare.

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Note for Editors:

[Paul](#) recently wrote a [two-lesson module](#) that is available to all schools in East Sussex. The lessons show how our youth of ages 11-18 are being targeted by the drinks industry through all of the social media. The lessons are based on the document by the BMA “ Under the Influence” with further research showing that alcohol is the second, behind nicotine, if not the first most deadly substance available.