

THE NEXT TWENTY YEARS OF PREVENTION IN INDIAN COUNTRY: VISIONARY, COMPLEX, AND PRACTICAL

CANDACE M. FLEMING, PH.D.

In the past few years, Dr. May has addressed alcohol issues in the context of the community, tribe, and larger levels of society. His current manuscript is an excellent summary of specific alcohol policy strategies which research and community experience suggest would lead to systems change, a reduction in alcohol abuse, and an increase in individual and family resiliency and health. These strategies and the concepts that underlie them are being discussed more and more in the prevention and intervention field, although approaches focusing exclusively on changing individuals remain the norm. Dr. May's article, if disseminated and discussed widely in Indian country, would go a long way to challenge that norm.

I read May's manuscript upon returning from a meeting of the Advisory Committee on Substance Abuse Prevention of the Office for Substance Abuse Prevention (OSAP). Much of what May suggests has strong parallels to that agency's newest initiative, the Community Partnership Demonstration Grant Program. This program is an outgrowth of research and social learning theories that suggest that long-range, comprehensive, community-based prevention programs are most effective at the local level. Models found to be effective in Indian communities are those that promote self-determination (i.e., they are not prescriptive and do not try to tell communities what to do), interdependence (they recognize that each individual and agency is affected by the actions or inactions of another), and social responsibility.

May's presentation is very refreshing because it proposes a broader view of prevention and intervention strategies than is generally held. The popular view focuses almost exclusively on changing individuals, who are considered to be the most manageable unit of society. This approach is the politically safest as well, for if the individual fails, only the individual is to blame. If society fails, we are all to blame.

The following are four principles outlined in the OSAP monograph, *Youth and Drugs: Society's Mixed Messages* (see "Additional Resources," this commentary). The reader will note that these principles and the concepts put forth by May are similar and reinforce each other.

1. Drug problems are complex and cannot be reduced solely to the level of individual or personal behavior.
2. An integrated approach to prevention emphasizes a shared responsibility for addressing problems.
3. An integrated approach to prevention also emphasizes long-term planning as well as short-term crisis intervention. While crises will always occur and must be planned for, communities need to do more than short-term problem solving.
4. It is necessary to disseminate information about the harmful effects of drugs, but this is rarely sufficient to bring about changes in behavior.
5. Comprehensiveness is an important part of an integrated approach.

Both May and the OSAP have developed a new vision of prevention that recognizes that it is more difficult and more complex than traditional approaches. Above all, they emphasize that prevention efforts must be practical. As May has written, "If the prevention measures described here can be *applied systematically and reasonably* within the social and cultural contexts of a Native community, then the ultimate result should be positive" (emphasis added). The OSAP *Youth and Drugs* puts it this way: "Prevention needs to be visionary and idealistic, but it must also be practical."

In particular, May is to be commended for recognizing that policy-makers can become enmeshed in an overwhelming set of interlocking and complex social, economic, political, and legal problems, with strongly held and conflicting feelings and opinions on all sides.

Process for Comprehensive Planning

May has proposed four action steps communities can follow to develop a comprehensive alcohol abuse-prevention plan:

1. Form a consensus of the problem.
2. Define "safe drinking" practices.
3. Define and promote specific safe provisions.
4. Build community support for a comprehensive prevention plan.

Videos and print materials can be used to acquaint community leaders with the scope of the problem and the latest thinking in the field. In addition, the college operated by the tribe can be an important place to develop a communitywide consensus about a substance abuse-prevention program. The college is useful because the student body generally

represents a cross-section of the community, and information-giving courses and symposiums may be organized through the college.

Additional Resources

A number of publications useful to community organizers are available through the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information, P.O. Box 2345, Rockville, MD, 20852, (301) 468-2600 or 1-800-SAY-NO-TO (DRUGS).

OSAP Prevention Monograph 6 — Youth and Drugs: Society's Mixed Messages has been previously mentioned in this review. The essays in this monograph focus attention on a variety of ways in which the social, cultural, and policy aspects of the environment contribute to drug use and can be marshalled to reduce the demand for drugs. Environmental approaches are a relatively new and unexplored dimension among prevention approaches.

Prevention Plus II: Tools for Creating and Sustaining a Drug-Free Community provides a framework for organizing or expanding community substance abuse prevention activities for youths into a coordinated system. This publication is written for persons from all facets of the community who are serious about prevention and in a position to help organize a community effort.

Research, Action and the Community: Experiences in the Prevention of Alcohol and Other Drug Problems includes 29 papers authored by people from eleven countries. The papers describe the experiences of community action projects in carrying out research in a variety of settings (e.g., school, the work place, drinking premises, and other community settings). These experiences contain important lessons for future initiatives.

Guide to Mobilizing Ethnic Minority Communities for Drug Abuse Prevention describes ways that ethnic minority communities can take action against the drug problem.

Handbook for Evaluating Drug and Alcohol Prevention Programs: Staff/Team Evaluation of Prevention Programs (STEPP) provides a comprehensive, but easy-to-use evaluation tool for program managers. It emphasizes that staff members must work together as a team and provides instruments and activities for determining program effectiveness and documenting and monitoring services.

Working with Evaluators: A Guide for Drug Abuse Prevention Program Managers offers guidelines to help prevention staff work cooperatively with evaluators and researchers in designing and implementing program evaluation. Instructions for developing an evaluation plan, issues in evaluating prevention programs, and the ways evaluation data are used are included.

Future Directions

This is a very exciting time for those who would develop and implement effective programs in Native communities. The signs point to significant, positive changes in how American Indians and Alaska Natives understand and react to alcohol. Some tribes are demonstrating strong, concerted community action; many communities are willing to share their experiences and be honest about their "failures." In addition, problems related to alcohol abuse currently have high visibility — although one never knows when the pendulum will swing to other issues.

The opportunity to speak, be heard, and make a difference has never been greater. Indian communities have the opportunity to lead the way in developing effective prevention programs for other sectors of American society.

Those who promote positive change most effectively are not those who provide a new set of answers, but those who allow a new set of questions.

— William Lofquist

Dept. of Psychiatry, UCHSC, C249-17
4200 East Ninth Avenue
Denver, Colorado 80262