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Book/Media Review

Is Addiction Really a Disease?

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Pleasure Unwoven: A Personal Journey about Addiction by Dr. Kevin McCauley, The Institute for Addiction Study, \$39.95, 70 minutes.

The foundation of modern addiction treatment rests on the propositions that addiction is a diagnosable and treatable medical disorder, that people experiencing addiction deserve and benefit from medical treatment, and that people can and do achieve long-term recovery from addiction. When Marty Mann set out to change the way Americans viewed alcoholism and the alcoholic in 1944, she posited five ideas as the centerpiece of what became a decades-long media campaign launched by the newly created National Committee for Education on Alcoholism:

1. *Alcoholism is a disease.*
2. *The alcoholic, therefore, is a sick person.*
3. *The alcoholic can be helped.*
4. *The alcoholic is worth helping.*
5. *Alcoholism is our No. 4 public health problem, and our public responsibility* (Mann, 1944, p. 354).

Many if not most of those who championed these ideas in local alcoholism councils across the United States did not need scientific studies to validate these ideas. They stood as living proof of those propositions; yet, some leaders of the modern alcoholism movement expressed reservations that the public proclamations were reaching beyond the boundaries of scientific knowledge.

...the idea that alcoholism as a disease was reached empirically by pure inference. It had never been really proved. ... I cannot help

but feel that the whole field of alcoholism is way out on a limb which any minute will crack and drop us all in a frightful mess. To change the metaphor, we have stuck our necks out and not one of us knows if he will be stepped on individually or collectively. I sometimes tremble to think of how little we have to back up our claims. We're all skating on pretty thin ice. (Tiebout, 1955, p.2)

In spite of these reservations, NCEA's core ideas prevailed and laid the foundation for the national network of addiction treatment programs that flourished in the 1970s and 1980s. Recovery became something of a cultural phenomenon during this period buttressed by widespread professional and public acknowledgement that addiction was a treatable disease.

The contention that addiction was a disease, as Tiebout feared, triggered a backlash movement against the disease concept, Alcoholics Anonymous, and 12-step-oriented addiction treatment. Through the 1980s and 1990s, the central tenets of this backlash were conveyed through the publications of Davies, Fingarette, Peele, Ragge, Schaler, Szasz, and Trimpey, to name a few. This backlash movement, which was nested within the larger restigmatization, demedicalization, and recriminalization of alcohol and other drug problems in the United States, argued that:

1. Addiction is a myth: there is no such self-contained clinical entity.
2. Problems related to excessive alcohol and other drug use are precisely that—problems—and do not constitute medical diseases, disorders, or conditions.
3. Excessive alcohol and other drug problems are learned behaviors that reflect choices, not uncontrollable diseases.
4. People should be held accountable for their bad choices.
5. Twelve step programs (and the treatments derived from them) are ineffective and potentially harmful.
6. The experiment of publicly funded addiction treatment is a failure and should be abandoned.

Ironically, the years that followed witnessed remarkable scientific breakthroughs on the neurobiological foundations of addiction (see as an example Dackis & O'Brien, 2005 and Shaham & Hope, 2005). The gap between public and scientific understandings of addiction was sustained in part because the professional addictions field lacked a device through which highly technical scientific studies could be conveyed to policy makers, the

public, allied professions, the addictions treatment workforce, and most importantly, the individuals and families affected by severe AOD problems. There were some notable public attempts at such education, such as Bill Moyer's 1998 PBS special *Close to Home: Moyers on Addiction* (with its metaphor of the "hijacked brain") and the 2007 HBO series, *Addiction*. In spite of these efforts, there remained a void in media that effectively conveyed the neuroscience of addiction in an engaging and understandable manner. A new documentary DVD, *Pleasure Unwoven*, by Dr. Kevin McCauley is a major step forward in filling that void.

Pleasure Unwoven is a 70-minute, high-definition video essay on the question, "Is addiction really a disease?" In answering this question, McCauley explores the neurobiological foundations of the loss of volitional control over drug-taking that is the essence of the addiction experience. Through this discussion, he answers two related questions at the heart of the patient/family experience of addiction: 1) "Why can't I (he/she) stop using?" and 2) "Why do (does) I (he/she) keep going back to using after a period of doing so well?" *Pleasure Unwoven* provides science-based answers to these questions that can help patients and families develop a framework for recovery initiation and long-term recovery maintenance.

Pleasure Unwoven is distinctive for several reasons. The documentary synthesizes very complex neuroscience in the clearest language to date. The illustrations and stories engage the viewer's attention and serve as an antidote to the glazed eyes and wandering minds that usually accompany such presentations. The use of Utah's State and National Parks provides breathtaking visual imagery as backdrops for the presentation. Perhaps the most important asset of this product is the persona of Dr. McCauley himself—his intelligence, warmth, compassion, respect for those whose ideas he challenges, and his passion for the importance of the issues he is discussing. He is the epitome of how every patient wishes their own physician would talk to them.

The quality of the *Pleasure Unwoven* as an educational product on this issue is unprecedented and has enormous potential for professional and public education. (My hope is that a 10-15 minute edited version of this DVD will be available for use with policy makers.) I have sent copies of *Pleasure Unwoven* to treatment leaders and recovery advocates around the country, and the response has been one of uniform praise for the quality of the product and its potential influence. Dr. McCauley's *Pleasure Unwoven* may prove to be one of the most effective educational tools ever developed on addiction, and will serve as an invaluable aid in the treatment of individuals and families impacted by addiction.

References

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