

White, W. (2003). Christopher Smithers Foundation. In Blocker, J. and Tyrell, I., Eds., *Alcohol and Temperance in Modern History*. Santa Barbara , CA: ABC-CLIO, pp. 154-155.

Christopher D. Smithers Foundation
William L. White

The Christopher D. Smithers Foundation has for fifty years promoted the understanding, prevention and treatment of alcoholism. The Foundation funds alcoholism-related projects, disseminates alcoholism-related information through the print and electronic media, and participates in alcoholism-related public policy forums.

Christopher Duncan Smithers was one of the founders and major stockholders of IBM. His son, R. Brinkley Smithers, was born 30 July 1907, in Glen Cove, New York. The young Smithers was painfully shy during his developmental years, but discovered the liberating effects of alcohol while studying medicine at John Hopkins University. When it was evident that Brinkley's love of alcohol far exceeded devotion to his studies, his father withdrew him from the University. Brinkley then worked as an investment banker through the Wall Street crash of 1929 and went on to work as a salesman at IBM. His business success was accompanied by an escalation in drinking that led to Brinkley's decision to retire at the age of 30. The retired life proved very conducive to his advancing alcoholism, which continued through his service in World War II. Following his discharge from military service, Brinkley operated a successful auto franchise, but was admitted more than fifty times for discrete detoxification at the Charles B. Towns Hospital in New York City.

In 1952, Brinkley created a philanthropic foundation to honor his father, who had died earlier that year. Originally chartered to support a wide variety of charitable activities, the mission of the Christopher D. Smithers Foundation was changed following R. Brinkley Smithers' recovery from alcoholism in 1954 and his attendance at the 1956 Yale School of Alcohol Studies. Ironically, it was through an employee he had once fired for drinking and who later found sobriety, that Brinkley was linked to Yev Gardner and to the beginning of his own recovery from

alcoholism. Gardner was a recovered alcoholic who was, at the time he met Brinkley, working as Marty Mann's assistant at the fledgling National Committee for Education on Alcoholism. It was an auspicious meeting for both Brinkley Smithers and the alcoholism field. The new mission of the Foundation was to address alcoholism as a public health problem. Over the next half-century, the Smithers Foundation would provide more than \$13 million to alcoholism-related projects, with more than double that amount contributed to such projects by members of the Smithers family.

The role of the Smithers family and the Smithers Foundation in the history of alcoholism treatment and recovery in America is difficult to depict because of the length and breadth of its scope. This support included enhancing the development of nearly every area of the alcoholism field from support in building its organizational infrastructure, to support for public and professional education, policy advocacy, research, treatment, and prevention.

The Smithers Foundation provided crucial financial support to the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD), both in terms of the operations of the national office and in providing seed grants to nurture the development of more than fifty local NCADD affiliates. It also provided financial support to such key institutions as the Center of Alcohol Studies (in its transition from Yale to Rutgers), the North American Association for Alcoholism Programs, the North Conway Institute, and the American Society of Addiction Medicine.

Smithers' actively supported the spread of occupational alcoholism programs within business and industry and provided a \$6.7 million gift to Cornell and Rutgers Universities to establish the R. Brinkley Smithers Institute for Alcoholism Prevention and Workplace Problems. The Smithers' Foundation also supported the development of many prominent treatment institutions including Hazelden Foundation and Chit Chat Foundation. In the early 1970s, Brinkley Smithers provided a personal gift of \$10 million to Roosevelt Hospital in New York City to open the Smithers Alcoholism Treatment and Training Center.

In addition to financially supporting journals (such as the *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol*) and seminal books in the field (such as E.M. Jellinek's *The Disease Concept of Alcoholism*), the Smithers Foundation published and distributed its public information and professional education materials on alcoholism. Particularly significant was its support in getting alcoholism books, pamphlets and treatment resource guides into the nation's libraries.

R. Brinkley Smithers' legacy transcends the financial resources that he infused into the alcoholism field and crucial points in its modern history. From the early days of his recovery from alcoholism, R. Brinkley Smithers remained

personally involved in leadership roles with NCADD and the larger alcoholism field. In addition to serving as chairman and president of the NCADD board, he founded the Long Island Council on Alcoholism and was co-founder of the Alcoholism Council of New York. He personally involved himself at critical times in the field's history. For example, when the most critical piece of legislation in the history of modern alcoholism treatment in the United States (the 1970 Hughes Act) had passed by both houses of Congress, but was not supported by the president, it was R. Brinkley Smithers who rallied the political forces that reached President Richard Nixon on 31 December, and persuaded him to sign the act into law only hours before it would have died by pocket veto.

R. Brinkley Smithers died at the age of 86 on 11 January 1994. He dedicated his life and financial resources to the proposition that alcoholism was a treatable disease. That legacy continues today through the ongoing work of the Christopher D. Smithers Foundation under the leadership of Brinkley's wife, Adele C. Smithers-Fornaci, who at the time of this writing serves as president of the Smithers Foundation and the chair of the board of the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence.

References

"History of the Smithers Foundation." [Http://www.smithersfoundation.org](http://www.smithersfoundation.org)

Minetree, Harry. "Alcoholism's Sober Philanthropist" in *Town & Country Magazine*, May (1986), pp. 184-243.

Scott, Neil. "R. Brinkley Smithers: 35 Years of Leadership" in *Alcoholism and Addictions Magazine*, October (1988), pp15-17.

Smithers, R. Brinkley. *40th Anniversary Report* Mill Neck, NY: The Christopher D. Smithers Foundation, Inc., 1992.