

Sci|Tech

THE BATTALION

3B

Thursday, April 11, 2002

Alcoholism's real effects

Medical professionals describe alcohol's toll on the body

By Jesse Stephenson
THE BATTALION

When most people think of alcoholics, images of whinos passed out in the gutter come to mind. While this is not entirely inaccurate, alcoholism is a disease that affects many people across a wide variety of livelihoods. These can include white-collar workers and students, not only the homeless on the streets.

Simply put, alcoholism is a psychological dependence.

"It is drinking to a point that causes an individual illness or harm to the individ-

ual's health," said Dr. Gerald Frye, a Texas A&M professor of medical pharmacology and toxicology.

Frye said alcoholism is a difficult sickness to track down. It seems to be a combination of biological and acquired traits.

"There is some evidence supporting a predisposition to alcohol, but it is not a purely genetic disease," Frye said.

Dr. Dennis J. Reardon, the Department of Student Life's Senior Coordinator of Alcohol and Drug Education Programs, said "Nobody has isolated the gene responsible for alcoholism yet." Although it does appear to be hereditary.

He said, "Looking back at family history, if Grandpa had it, he could have passed it down to grandson. It does have a tendency to skip a generation."

Studies done at Texas A&M estimate the number of alcoholics in the student population to be around five per cent.

"Most of those are hereditary alcoholics that come to school," said Reardon. "Maybe four to five percent of the students who are alcoholics develop alcoholism at A&M." Within the general population, the number of alcoholics lies between 10 and 12 percent.

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism formed a task force in 1998 to uncover facts about drinking on college campuses. The study found that drinking contributes to an estimated 1,400 deaths, 500,000 injuries, and 70,000 cases of sexual assault a year.

There are various symptoms of alcoholism. These include blackouts, tolerance, withdrawal, and denial. When a person has a blackout, he or she will have no memory after a night of heavy drinking.

"They occur when alcohol cuts off the connection between short and long term memory," Reardon said.

Advanced stages of alcoholism are marked by poor relationships, a poor outlook on life, legal troubles and poor job performance.

"In the case of students, you will see poor academic performance," Reardon said. There are also effects that you will not necessarily see. The body can become severely damaged by heavy drinking, which Frye describes as anything that exceeds three or four drinks a day.

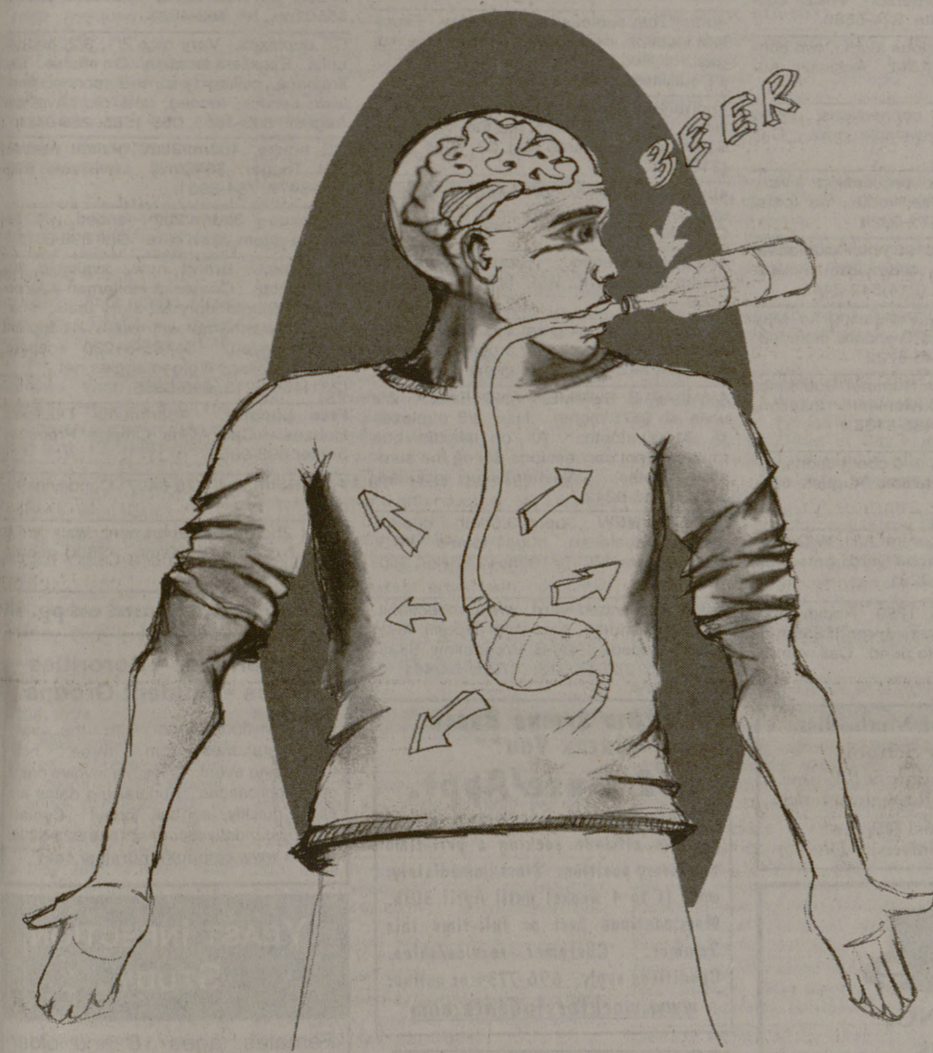
"Cirrhosis of the liver, weakening of the heart muscles, and an increased risk of high blood pressure and stroke are all related to heavy drinking," he said. Brain damage is also highly associated with alcoholism.

But Reardon said that some of the damage may be reversible.

"Studies have shown that the brain may be able to recover," Reardon said. "The liver damage is not repairable, but you only need ten percent of your liver to function properly." Still, quitting now is greatly beneficial to all heavy drinkers.

The greatest number of fatalities and injuries are a result of alcohol-related accidents, most notably drunk driving. Also, accidents such as falling when you are drunk constitute a large number of injuries, Reardon said.

Alcoholism is a disease that is never cured. An alcoholic is always in the recovering stage. "An alcoholic who does not drink is an abstaining alcoholic," Frye said. "There is no cure for the underlying reasons that cause you to drink."



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