

Researchers experiment with new drug treatment

Researchers and treatment specialists at the Addiction Research Foundation are experimenting with a new approach to the treatment of alcoholism and prescription drug abuse.

"Most treatment programs are dominated by the psychosocial approach which offers the patient advice and counselling, sometimes augmented with medicines to reduce or eliminate a patient's drug abuse," says Dr. Ed Sellers, head of the ARF's psychopharmacological research

Mr. Sellers, Dr. Mark Sobell, head of sociobehavioral research, and Dr. Linda Sobell, head of behavioral treatment research, believe that the traditional approach does not go far enough to integrate the use of both counselling and medicine.

"There are programs that provide a combination of both approaches, but they usually lean heavily on the psychosocial approach and offer medicine either as a last resort or as a separate treatment.

"Our idea is to offer a truly integrated treatment program, using effective medicine simultaneously with proven counselling techniques - giving the patient the best of both worlds."

Mr. Sellers and his team of researchers are looking for medicines that can be used to treat substance abusers in a number of ways: to block the reinforcing effects of a drug, to change a person's mood, to improve their ability to learn new behaviors, to modify their desire to use drugs

and to lessen the effects of withdrawal.

However, Mr. Sellers admits that medication is not a perfect solution. "Even if we came up with a wonder drug, patients would still have to accept the medicine and we have to rely on them to take it when prescribed. Medication is usually expensive and can also produce side effects. That's why we need an integrated approach. The medicine should ideally be used on a short-term basis to get them down and get them off."

"At the same time," says Mark Sobell, "we work with the patients to help them develop the skills they need to stay off drugs. Counselling teaches patients to deal with situations that lead to drug use, and can take many forms: directed reading, advice, homework, goals setting, reinforcement and review of risk situations."

Mr. Sellers and the Sobells see many advantages to the integrated approach.

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