

mains of cognition, mood, behaviour, ADLs and social interaction. Caregivers can be asked to focus on the ability to participate in conversations, anxiety, and the behaviours of agitation and aggression.

Serge Gauthier

Neurologist

Professor and Director

Alzheimer's Disease Research Unit

McGill Centre for Studies in Aging

Montréal, Que.

Nathan Herrmann

Geriatric Psychiatrist

Professor of Psychiatry

Sunnybrook and Women's Health

Sciences Centre

University of Toronto

Toronto, Ont.

Florian Ferreri

Psychiatrist

Research Fellow

Catherine Agbokou

Research Fellow

Psychiatrist

Clinical Psychopharmacology Unit

Allan Memorial Institute

McGill University Health Centre

Montréal, Que.

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Competing interests: Dr. Gauthier and Dr. Herrmann are the principal investigators in the ongoing Canadian randomized study comparing memantine with placebo, sponsored by Lundbeck Canada. Seven years ago, Dr. Gauthier was awarded (through a peer-reviewed process) a research chair funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and Rx&D Canada's Research-Based Pharmaceutical Companies (via a pool of funds from different companies, including Lundbeck Canada). Both Dr. Gauthier and Dr. Herrmann have received speakers' honoraria and consultant fees from Lundbeck Canada. No competing interests declared for Florian Ferreri or Catherine Agbokou. None of the authors received any honoraria for writing this letter.

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Dealing with alcoholism

Stephen Hwang, in his commentary on homelessness and harm reduction,¹ notes the severe limitations of the study by Tiina Podymow and colleagues,² including the small number of subjects and the unreliability of self-reported evidence. As an addictions counsellor for many years, I have yet to encounter anyone meeting the DSM-IV criteria for alcoholism who accurately reports consumption levels; either they lie deliberately or, alas, they are too befuddled to recall. In addition, people with alcoholism tend to be "people-pleasers," telling the researcher or counsellor what they think he or she wants to hear, which compounds the problems of self-reporting.

If you want to get at the truth about attempts to cut down, consider attending 3 or 4 "open" meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous a week for a year. Although the evidence provided at AA meetings is also self-reported, it has 2 advantages: the people involved are likely to be sober and therefore less fearful of telling the truth, and there will be considerably more "subjects," which should also increase the reliability.

One thing that I have discovered is that until and unless a person with alcoholism discovers what he or she would rather do than drink, there will

be considerable difficulty in abstaining or maintaining abstinence. There is also the frequently unspoken terror of stopping. It can take an awful lot of time and effort to bring any addict to that point, but at least by working within the framework of the trans-theoretical model,³ the process can be started.

The idea of giving a person with alcoholism a drink every hour on demand because it will help him "cut down" or reduce harm appalls me. If it's such a good idea, why don't we suggest the same for smokers?

Peter O'Loughlin

The Eden Lodge Practice

Beckenham, UK

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[Dr. Hwang responds:]

The main finding of the study by Tiina Podymow and colleagues¹ was that the homeless participants in their harm reduction program had significantly fewer numbers of emergency department visits and police encounters after entry into the program, as determined by a review of hospital and police records. Data on these service utilization outcomes were no doubt more reliable than the self-reported data on alcohol consumption.

Few would argue that one of our duties as physicians is to encourage patients with alcoholism to strive to abstain from alcohol. Many of these individuals may find it helpful to participate in programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous. But what do we recommend to someone who drinks 8 bottles of wine a day, sleeps on the street and expresses an unwillingness to contemplate abstinence? Harm reduction programs such as the one described provide a means of engaging these people in a way that may ultimately lead to