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A Note From NIDA's Director

Science Versus Stigma

Stigma is an enormous obstacle to more effective drug abuse treatment. Widespread perceptions that addiction strips individuals of basic human qualities lead to self-fulfilling predictions that those who are addicted cannot recover or ever play positive and productive social roles.

Two articles in this issue of *Addiction Science & Clinical Practice* illustrate a fundamental truth about stigma: It arises when we do not understand the true nature of a health condition.

Dr. Michael Dennis and Dr. Christy K Scott, in a thorough presentation of the reasons for managing addiction as a chronic disease, enumerate some of the consequences of regarding it, instead, as an acute problem. These include demoralized patients, frustrated clinicians and families, and a treatment armamentarium that is often ill-suited to deal with the challenges in long-term recovery. Dr. Diana Sylvestre argues that the pervasive fear of hepatitis C is excessive. She reports that misperceptions cause some patients to despair and avoid seeking treatment, and some treatment providers to believe—incorrectly—that treating drug abusers with this disease is futile.

Historically, stigma wanes when people understand why and how a disease develops. Striking examples include the conceptual rehumanizing of people with leprosy and epilepsy when science accounted for those diseases' disturbing manifestations.

Today, researchers and informed, creative clinicians are achieving the understanding and management skills that eventually will erase the stigma surrounding drug addiction. We are witnessing another instance of one of the great moral achievements of science: establishing the right of people who have been regarded as hopeless or untouchable to full consideration as human beings.



Nora D. Volkow, M.D.
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