

Drug Addiction Research and the Health of Women

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INTRODUCTION

The presentations at the Conference on Drug Addiction Research and the Health of Women reveal much information about what has been learned over the past few decades. NIDA can be proud of its more than 20 years of accomplishments; however, much remains to be done. Many of the conference speakers described areas of need and suggested strategies and methods to address them.

Beginning with a major concern for pregnant, drug-addicted women in the early 1970s, the author and other neonatologists became aware of the multitude of issues faced by women of childbearing age who also used drugs. During the past 25 years, the author and other researchers in this area have been assisted by the NIDA leadership in developing initiatives and obtaining more specific funding to study the area of drug addiction and the health of women.

CONDUCT OF THE CONFERENCE

The conference began with a presentation on the history of drug abuse and women. Subsequent speakers discussed the neurobiological correlates of addiction and shared findings from basic and applied treatment research, prevention, epidemiology, biological and behavioral mechanisms, treatment and etiology, and the consequences of drug abuse among women, as well as legal and other crosscutting issues.

The 3-day conference could have lasted longer because of the large amount of information that exists in the area of drug abuse and the health of women. However, the selected speakers presented the most salient issues and encouraged participants to seek additional information and attempt to learn more from their own research. Participants were stimulated by taking part in question-and-answer sessions with the speakers.

NIDA also solicited written comments from conference participants on how to improve research priorities for all women, including women suffering from drug addiction. The NIDA exhibit provided relevant materials for conference participants.

BACKGROUND

As chair of the Women's Advisory Committee at NIDA, the author established a group of NIDA women and men from various drug abuse fields, who contributed to the development of the comprehensive conference agenda. Some who worked diligently with other NIDA staff members within their respective divisions in developing this conference included Lula Beatty, Ron Herning, Coryl Jones, Edythe London, Lisa Onken, Elizabeth Rahdert, Zili Sloboda, and Pushpa Thadani. The NIDA Office of the Director introduced the Women's Health Agenda; many individuals worked on it, including J.C. Comolli, Katherine Davenny, Linda Thomas, and Cora Lee Wetherington, all of whom served on the Women's Advisory Committee. Linda Thomas also designed a computer-generated poster advertising the conference.

The expert speakers, moderators, and participants provided the vital structure and energy for this conference. Many women attended; however, very few men were in attendance. An audience of equal numbers of men and women focusing on women's issues would constitute a significant success in meeting the goals discussed. The NIDA leadership, particularly Richard Millstein, had strongly supported the idea of this conference since its conception. Mr. Millstein has long been supportive of women's issues.

LOOKING FORWARD

It is fortunate that there are and have been strong women leaders in Government, including such individuals as Donna Shalala, Susan Blumenthal, and Vivian Pinn. These women never take "no" for an answer when they plead for support of women's issues. The Federal Government's recent efforts to balance the budget and decrease the deficit have caused research funding to remain relatively unchanged or to be diminished for various Institutes of NIH. The numbers of staff members have been cut, and difficult decisions must be made about how to allocate monies. Although some areas of research do not require

further study, interagency activities are needed, as described by both David Mactas, director of the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, and Mr. Millstein. Although it is regrettable that not all issues have been addressed, much has been accomplished in the field of drug abuse research.

In the 6 months preceding this conference, the NIDA Office of the Director provided the opportunity for the Institute and its staff members to interact with other Institutes and individuals as well as with the Women's Health Initiative and the Office of Research on Women's Health at NIH. Heart disease, cancer, and stroke appear to be more "acceptable" to the general public than drug abuse; therefore, NIDA and others in this field must market their research, prevention, and treatment efforts and communicate the importance of how drug abuse affects so many organs in the human body. As stated by NIDA Director Alan I. Leshner, drug addiction is primarily a brain disease that is chronic and relapsing in nature.

The past 20 years have shown that people who focus on various interests—treatment, prevention, and drug abuse consequences—sometimes pit one interest against another. In the "War on Drugs," who is fighting whom? Is it only the public against the drug traffickers? Sometimes it seems the battles are prevention v. treatment, prevention and treatment v. research, basic research v. clinical research, medications v. behavioral therapy, treatment v. the criminal justice system, the majority v. minorities, men v. women, and even mothers v. children. If these battles exist, there can be no success in the war against drugs and drug abuse. All the aspects—prevention, treatment, research—and the individuals involved—researchers, policymakers, prevention and treatment professionals—deserve to be respected and treasured.

The health of women is a vital issue, but it has been given less attention than the health of men. With the present leadership in the women's health field, there is now movement in the right direction. However, the concerns of women must be raised to a higher level among other national priorities and afforded not only dignity but also a solid scientific basis.

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