

## Alcoholism, Medicalization, and Policy

Perhaps you know someone who struggles with an alcohol problem. The American Medical Association (AMA) officially designated alcoholism as an illness in 1956 (Jellinek 1960). Alcoholism is a dependency on alcohol (alcohol addiction), a chronic disease that includes strong craving, continued use of alcohol despite physical and social problems, and inability to limit drinking (CDC 2016b). The disease is often progressive and fatal. By labeling alcoholism as a disease, the medical profession gains more power and influence as an agent of social control (Conrad 2007).

Some health care professionals, however, argue that the disease concept is the wrong approach—that what is really at stake is “heavy drinking” as a way of life. Rather than treating a “disease,” they feel that professionals should be concerned with approaches that will change the way in which individuals organize their behaviors. These researchers and practitioners argue that heavy drinkers can become nondrinkers or moderate drinkers who can control their drinking.

Whereas the Alcoholics Anonymous approach to alcoholism treatment involves lay people in groups helping each other stay away from alcohol in a spiritually oriented manner, the *medicalization of alcoholism* calls for treatment by professionals—psychiatrists, psychologists, hospitals, and clinics. Some people see these approaches as complementary, but others think they are incompatible and conflict with one another (Conrad 2007; Roisen 2012).

There may be truth in both models based on individual differences. Treatment programs can be



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The label alcoholic has a number of implications, including the fact that the stigma associated with the term may prevent some people from seeking help. Alcoholics Anonymous and other alcohol treatment centers have recast alcoholism as a disease, hoping that the redefinition will remove stigma. These people discuss their alcoholism at an AA meeting.

found based on both of these models, and the debate about the best approach continues.

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### Engaging With Sociology

1. Many of us have a friend or relative who struggles with alcohol or drug problems. What labels do others place on that person?
2. Do you think alcohol or drug problems come from a lack of self-discipline or a physical illness requiring medical treatment? What might you do to help the person?
3. How can you approach this person to help prevent future disease or chronic problems?