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Anti-stigma campaign long overdue

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In our society, would you rather be known as an alcoholic or a person who suffers from depression? This was the question I posed to dozens of women over the past year, as I researched the Atkinson series Women and Alcohol.

Not one woman chose alcoholic. They felt the stigma was too profound.

Turns out, their instincts were right. As the online comments poured in last week, there were two schools of thought.

One was laudatory, empathetic to the stories of addiction and recovery. The other? Judgmental. My mailbox overflowed with moving personal stories and positive messages: the series "should be required reading in every school in the country . . . Don't stop writing!"

But on the web, the two sides duked it out. "Alcoholism is a disease, and it can break the strongest people," wrote one reader, having absorbed Beata Klimek's story. This was a red flag to many. "Addiction is not a disease," wrote another. "It's a personal lifestyle choice . . . people need to be held accountable for the choices they make . . . let's stop pampering them and justifying their behaviour by putting nice little disease labels on it."

"Stop calling it an illness!" agreed another. "That's total bunk designed as a crutch for the weak . . . and this recovering rubbish is more bunk."

"Alcohol and drugs are the means for people who lack intestinal fortitude to face trauma," wrote a third person. "Stop glorifying addictive personalities and making excuses for lack of courage."

Yet another wrote: "Alcoholism is not a disease. Cancer, diabetes, those are diseases. Alcoholism is self inflicted. Grow up, take personal responsibility and learn to say NO."

More than one reader argued back: "So, you say alcoholism isn't a disease? So it's the alcoholic's fault? . . . We would love to be able to enjoy a drink or two responsibly without any incident. Unfortunately, this is not the case . . . Ignorance may be bliss, but it is definitely counterproductive."

Is alcoholism a disease? Peter Thanos says yes. A neuroscientist at the U.S. Department of Energy's Brookhaven National Laboratory on Long Island, N.Y., Thanos is blunt: "We have known for more than 20 years that alcoholism is a chronic, relapsing brain disease. Science supports this truth."

Patrick Smith, former vice-president of clinical programs at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and new CEO of Toronto's Renascent treatment centre, is also blunt: "The jury is in. The Canadian Medical Association calls it a disease. The American Medical Association calls it a disease."

Smith believes social drinkers have a difficult time understanding the physiological realities of alcohol dependence.

"It's not part of their lived experience," he says Smith. "Still, no one says: 'Just because I don't have diabetes, it doesn't exist.'"

Why do so many still see addiction as a moral failure? Why such stigma?

Reader T. J. Harrison, an alcoholic, writes of the "shame that attaches to the label . . . an alcoholic woman is just a blowsy, sloppy object of mockery, dismissed as vulgar, unladylike and worse."

Says Nancy Black, director of concurrent disorders at St. Joseph's Care Group in Thunder Bay: "Addiction is so far into the shadows because of stigma. It's viewed as an issue of bad choices, wilfulness or lack thereof. Mental health has had national leadership on anti-stigma, and addiction needs a similar national response. But the voices are silent."

She's right. When it comes to leadership, mental health has had any number of prominent advocates, most notably former federal finance minister Michael Wilson. For years, Wilson has spoken about the death of his son, Cameron, by suicide. Over time, many families have

joined him with their own stories of loss. Heather and Lloyd Craig of Vancouver. Ginny and Kerry Dennehy of Whistler, B.C. Eric Windeler and Sandra Hanington of Toronto.

Addiction needs the same advocacy: prominent individuals who are willing to own the issue.

What were T. J. Harrison's wishes? "I hope that your series of articles spares future generations the anguish of ever having to try to recover from an intractable condition, and spurs thoughtful discussion of — and enlightened action on — a complex topic."

Enlightened action? We're long overdue for an anti-stigma campaign. The gap between what we know about addiction and our perceptions of it? A national embarrassment. People overcome addiction. They get well. They need to speak up, and they need to be heard.

Who will play the Michael Wilson role? Who will play the supporting roles? I invite all of you to ask yourselves: Who will lead the way?

I look forward to profiling that person and the ones who follow. With a convergence of voices, so much could be won.

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