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CPDD News and Views

G. Alan Marlatt, Ph.D. (1941–2011): A visionary and luminary in the field of addictions[☆]

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Monday, March 14, 2011, was a typical Pacific Northwest day at Warm Beach, a small community on the shores of Puget Sound north of Seattle. It was overcast with a threat of heavy rain, but with a hint of sunlight breaking through. As eagles soared overhead and a light drizzle fell gently on the skylights of the cabin that for many years had been a retreat and a source of creative inspiration, surrounded by family and loved ones, Alan Marlatt passed peacefully and painlessly away. And those of us who have had the honor and privilege of working with him are mindful of the loss of a true visionary and luminary in the field of addictive behaviors.

Alan made many significant contributions to our understanding of the addiction process, its prevention and its treatment. The first of these was made through a combination of his clinical observation skills, his curiosity and creativity, and his ability to find potential solutions rather than maintaining the status quo. At the time that Alan began his career-long and award-winning work in addictions in the early 1970s, alcoholism was considered to be a chronic relapsing disease; many professionals as well as alcohol-dependent individuals viewed relapse as inevitable. However, based on the collection of detailed qualitative information, Alan and colleagues began to see a pattern of interpersonal and intrapersonal

factors associated with patients resuming drinking following treatment. If these “high-risk” situations could be identified and if individuals could be trained to identify them in advance and cope with them if encountered, the likelihood of relapse could be reduced. This was the genesis of relapse prevention therapy, a cognitive-behavioral model that has had a profound impact and has become a standard component in the treatment of alcohol and drug dependence; it also has been listed on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s (SAMHSA) National Registry of Evidence-based Practices and Programs (NREPP).

In addition to its clinical application, the theoretical model of relapse also contributed to a number of laboratory-based experimental analogue studies that examined the role of factors such as anxiety, anger, and social modeling on drinking behavior. Much of this took place in simulated bar settings that increased the salience of drinking cues and generalizability to “real life” drinking situations. The use of such “bar labs” is another innovation that Alan introduced and that has spread to many research groups. Another important contribution of this analogue work was the development of the “balanced placebo” design, which allows the disentangling of pharmacological and cognitive expectational effects of alcohol or other drugs on behavior. We since have learned that what the individual expects from alcohol or drugs may be as important, if not more so, on certain types of behavior than the actual pharmacological effects.

Not one to shy away from controversial issues, Alan, along with a number of others, felt that the disease model of alcoholism had drawbacks and he became actively involved in the “controlled drink-

ing” debate. Over time, this view evolved into his support of harm reduction or minimization approaches. While viewing abstinence as an important goal, many addicted individuals have difficulty achieving or maintaining it and others may choose not to endorse abstinence as a goal at all. If this is the case, from a very pragmatic view, what can be done to minimize the harm to self and others through continued use? This approach is best exemplified in a unique project in Seattle that provides housing to “hard core” alcohol-dependent individuals who have been involved in multiple unsuccessful prior treatment episodes; however, they are not required to stop drinking as a condition of their receiving their housing and are actually allowed to drink in their rooms. Opponents initially said that it would never work, yet the results have proven otherwise: alcohol consumption among the residents has decreased dramatically, utilization of emergency medical services and overall costs have been reduced markedly, and many individuals have chosen to enter treatment on their own.

A generalization of the work on relapse prevention was a shift of its principles and the adaptation of its methods from treatment to prevention. Working within a university setting and being aware of the harmful effects, including fatalities, that heavy drinking can cause for students, Alan along with graduate students and colleagues embarked on developing methods to reduce heavy and binge drinking and minimize harm. This involved working with high-risk groups, such as fraternities and sororities, student dormitories, and incoming freshmen identified as having the potential for developing drinking problems. This process led to the development of the Brief Alcohol Screening and

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Intervention for College Students (BASICS) program, which has also been listed on the SAMHSA National Registry of Evidence-based Practices and Programs. The BASICS program has been disseminated widely and has become standard practice in hundreds of colleges across the United States.

A deeply spiritual man, Alan combined this aspect of his personal life with his professional work. In the late 1970s he taught an undergraduate personality course using a text that focused on both Eastern and Western views of personality and behavior. He held meditation groups in his home for graduate students. He went on meditation retreats that were rejuvenating. His most recent focus on mindfulness-based relapse prevention extended and blended his early work on relapse prevention with Eastern philosophy, meditative approaches, and mindfulness.

These many accomplishments have resulted in over 300 articles and chapters, as well as over 20 books over the course of a career spanning over 40 years, the majority of which were spent at the University of Washington since joining the faculty in the Department of Psychology in 1972. His accomplishments

also led to a number of major awards: the Jellinek Memorial Award for outstanding contributions to knowledge in the field of alcohol studies, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Innovators in Combating Substance Abuse Award, the Distinguished Scientist Award from the American Psychological Association, and Lifetime Achievement awards from the Research Society on Alcoholism and the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies. Alan also was on the editorial board of numerous professional journals and served as a member of the National Advisory Councils for both the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism and the National Institute on Drug Abuse. It is rare that the passing of an academician gains the attention of the *New York Times* (http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/22/us/22marlatt.html?_r=2&ref=obituaries) and *Time Magazine* (<http://healthland.time.com/2011/03/15/appreciation-g-alan-marlatt-brought-compassion-to-addiction-treatment/>). Alan was one such rarity.

These many accomplishments are all things that one can “count” and can be found in Alan’s curriculum vitae. How-

ever, what may “count” more but will not be found in his C.V. is the human and humanistic side of this multidimensional individual: kind hearted, good spirited, compassionate, generous, creative, supportive, humorous, witty. He opened himself up and gave himself freely to his students, co-workers, and colleagues. Those of us who are former and current graduate students have talked about trying to create a “tree” to track his influence on the addictions field through his trainees; however, we soon realized that to do so would require us to create a forest rather than a single tree. He has contributed to the education of hundreds of scientist-practitioners through his teaching and mentorship. His network of associates and those whom he has touched personally and professionally is extensive and international in scope. He has left his prints in our hearts and minds, and there is a cadre of us to carry on the important work that he championed throughout his career.

Let us forever be mindful of Alan as a scholar, mentor, colleague and friend. May his spirit soar with the eagles.