**Bill W's Other Treatment Program For Alcoholism:**

**The Remarkable Recovery Movement You Haven't Heard About**

***By Howard Rosenthal, EdD, CCMHC, MAC, NCC, LPC***

When *Time Magazine* (Cheever, 1999) put together the Top 100 Most Influential People of the 20th Century, Bill Wilson made the list along with luminaries such as Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein. And why not? Bill W., born William Griffith Wilson, or Bill Wilson (after his untimely death on January 24, 1971), was the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous or AA. Thanks to the seminal work of Bill W. and Dr. Bob (actually Dr. Bob Smith, birth name Robert Holbrook Smith), AA currently has a hairline over two million members and sports approximately 123,000 groups throughout the world (Myers, 2010). The successful AA 12-step model spawned other worthwhile programs to help those with eating disorders, narcotics, and virtually any addiction you could possibly name.

Most experts in the area of group practice will tell you that AA, which held its initial meeting with Bill W. and Dr. Bob on June 10, 1935, has helped more individuals than any group in the history of mankind. *Brave New World* author Aldous Huxley was convinced Bill W. was the greatest social architect of the 20th century (Cheever, 1999).

Bill Wilson never turned his back on AA. But as great as AA was, and is, it doesn't work for everybody; nor does psychoanalysis, gestalt therapy, reality therapy, person-centered therapy, brief strategic therapy, motivational interviewing, and several hundred other modalities of treatment we could easily add to this list. Bill Wilson was well aware of this over 50 years ago, and thus was searching for a safe, effective method to make AA even better. He knew his program was a viable option to achieve sobriety, but maybe, just maybe there was something else that could help either on its own or could be used in conjunction with AA. What follows is a major part of the story most counselors and addiction specialists have never heard.

**Was Bill W. Finally Cured by Massive Doses of an Ordinary B Vitamin?**

Bill Wilson was a renaissance man in the sense that he took an overwhelming interest in physiological and psychological theories well beyond the scope of AA. In 1960 Wilson attended a parapsychology conference that was held in New York City. According to Bill's wife Lois (who co-founded Al-Anon with her husband in 1951), it was at that event that Aldous Huxley, the accomplished British writer, and a fervent believer in AA, introduced Bill W. to Canadian biochemist and psychiatrist Abram Hoffer, and the British psychiatrist, Humphry Osmond. These two doctors enthusiastically shared with Bill their results of a remarkable new treatment that was helping alcoholics and schizophrenics alike. The three men immediately became friends and their respect for each other's knowledge was reciprocal. Dr. Hoffer admitted that he learned more about addiction from Bill Wilson than from any other single source. Fortunately, Hoffer's job allowed him to travel to New York City where he continued to meet with Bill W. on numerous occasions (Hoffer, 2008).

The new treatment consisted of giving patients niacin, a B vitamin, in seriously large dosages. Just for the record, niacin was discovered in 1937. The nutrient had the capability of eliminating a condition called pellagra. Pellagra was derived from the Italian words for "rough skin," which is a major symptom of the affliction (Hoffer and Foster, 2007). Not long after their initial meeting Bill began taking 3 grams of niacin daily niacin himself. The depression and anxiety that had plagued him for virtually his entire life lifted in two weeks (Hoffer, Saul, and Foster 2012).

Dr. Hoffer noted that the next major milestone took place when he was spending an evening at Wilson's hotel. Much to his surprise, Bill Wilson revealed to Hoffer that he had swung into action and had given 30 AA members he considered to be close friends a protocol of high dose niacin. Seemingly, these were highly educated and successful individuals, including doctors and celebrities. According to Wilson, the results were nothing short of spectacular. Ten were normal in one month. The other ten were normal the second month. The third ten had not yet recovered (Hoffer, 2008).

Bill Wilson became more excited when he discovered that all of niacin's side effects appeared to be positive ones. The substance was ideal for helping people with arthritis. It also promoted lower LDL or the so-called bad cholesterol levels, all the while raising LDL, billed as the good cholesterol.

Since Wilson's goal was to make AA even better, he decided to distribute this information to the doctors of AA. That's correct, there were so many doctors who were alcoholics themselves that they formed their own association. The group subsequently asked Bill W. to come to Indianapolis to be a speaker at their conference. Bill acquiesced, but only with the stipulation that Dr. Hoffer accompany him and speak. Both men presented and a committee of three AA physicians was formed to investigate the claims for niacin. Interestingly enough, the three physicians themselves began to ingest niacin, and all began feeling healthier!

According to Hoffer's recollection (2008), The International Organization of AA in New York City -- although they were friends of Wilson and appointed by him -- were not happy with his behavior. One criticism was that since Bill W didn't possess an MD, and was not a licensed physician, he should not be talking about vitamin therapy.

Another psychiatrist, Dr. David Hawkins, though trained as psychoanalyst, befriended the trio and began using niacin with his own clients. Here again, the results proved outstanding. With Bill Wilson's guidance, Abram Hoffer created Schizophrenics Anonymous in Canada on October 15, 1964, which championed large dosages of niacin. The treatment paradigm also suggested cutting back on sugary foods (Hoffer, Saul, and Foster, 2012).

**The Fabled Green and Yellow Booklets: Bill W. Spreads the Word**

One strike against niacin was the fact that is was also known as nicotinic acid. The name sounded suspiciously like nicotine, the substance in tobacco that helps make cigarettes addictive. Thus, some practitioners using the vitamin preferred the name B-3 to ameliorate any confusion. Wilson was especially fond of the term B-3, and he is accredited with helping to popularize the nutrient's diplomatic name. The usual therapeutic dosage for alcoholics was 3000 mg daily (i.e., 3 grams), or two 500 mg tablets taken after each meal.

It would be an understatement to say that Bill Wilson tried to promote the use of niacin as a treatment or supplemental treatment to AA. In December of 1965 Wilson sent a communication to AA's physicians titled *The Vitamin B-3 Therapy: A Promising Treatment for Schizophrenia -- and its high relevance to the field of alcoholism* (Wilson, 1965)*.* Trust me when I say there was nothing skimpy about this document. The booklet contained enough information to fill 20 single-spaced 8 1/2 x 11-inch pages, and if you add the appendices the number grew to 28 pages. In the document Wilson stressed that in his opinion AA fails for approximately one-third of all the people who try it. He then goes on to stress that B-3 therapy was a major breakthrough in the field of mental health. Moreover, the document was inundated with research as well as a wealth of successful case histories. 1500 copies were circulated.

When Bill W. failed to get the response he wanted, rather than give up, he created two more booklets. Both of these historical documents sported yellow covers and therefore you will hear folks refer to them as the "yellow papers," but in reality, Wilson called them "yellow booklets," while the original 1965 edition sported a green jacket.

Wilson tried to rally the troops again in February of 1968 when he penned the first yellow booklet titled *The Vitamin B-3 Therapy: A Second Communication to A.A.'s Physicians.* A second printing was also released in June of that same year. In the end, over 30,000 people ordered this publication which was packed with 48 pages of valuable information . . . again all praising the merits of vitamin B-3 therapy (Wilson, 1968).

In January of 1971 his *The Vitamin B-3 Therapy: A Third Communication to A.A.'s Physicians,* which is he called "An updating progress report and supplement to the 1968 (yellow cover). B-3booklet in the contents."The document was an 8-page treatise released posthumously (Wilson, 1971).

**The Addiction That Killed the Co-Founder of AA**

Bill Wilson spent the last eleven years of his life trying to persuade physicians to embrace B-3 as a viable treatment option. Ironically, Wilson died on January 24, 1971, of pneumonia, in a Miami Florida hospital on the day of his 53rd wedding anniversary with Lois. Although he had conquered his alcohol addiction, according to many reports his excessive cigarette smoking resulted in emphysema, and he often relied on oxygen to breathe. In essence, the man who helped save millions of lives worldwide from the demon of alcoholism, most likely died early from another form of addiction . . . tobacco, although the official cause of death was listed as pneumonia (Cheever, 2005).

Since Dr. Bob, a physician himself, passed away approximately ten years prior to Bill W's discovery of niacin, we will never know how the other founder of AA felt about intervention with B-3. That said, Bill Wilson did share the fact that Russell Smith, MD, nephew of Dr. Bob, purportedly treated 507 hard-core alcoholics with very high doses of niacin and achieved stellar results: 340 remained sober, 98 reported improved well-being, and only 66 did not respond to the treatment (Wilson, 1968).

**10 Key Reasons Why AA And Most Treatment Professionals Never Embraced Niacin Therapy**

Why would it be that Bill Wilson's first co-discovery, AA, flourished beyond anybody's wildest imagination to become the most popular group treatment of all-time, while his second discovery, B-3 treatment, has largely been ignored, suppressed, or simply unknown, to most clients and AA members as well as addiction treatment specialists? Certainly, I don't have the answer. Some trends just seem to catch on and . . . well . . . others just don't. Although we could literally cite hundreds of reasons, here are the factors I believe have had the most impact on the evolution (or perhaps I should say lack of evolution) of niacin therapy.

1. **Policy issues.** Obviously, although Bill Wilson was acutely aware of it, from a strict policy standpoint, it is plausible if AA embraced Vitamin B-3 Therapy, this procedure might violate traditions six and ten.

**Tradition Six—**An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.
**Tradition Ten—**Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.

2. The **niacin flush.** For Vitamin B-3, Niacin, or Nicotinic Acid Therapy to have a clinical impact, the dosage generally has to be high enough to cause repeated niacin flushes. Although a very small portion of the population finds this feeling desirable, most individuals find that it is a rather negative and perhaps even a painful experience. During the flush blood vessels dilate and the body often feels abnormally warm. The flush can easily go on for ten minutes or even longer. Certain areas of the body such as the face, ears, forearms, and trunk, can turn red or bright pink. The overall experience can be extremely scary. Itching, tingling, and burning is common especially if hot liquids or warm foods have been ingested. Nausea may occur. Some individuals are immune to the flush or do not experience the flush after repeated dosages, but for most of us the rule is: No flush . . . no cure . . . it's that simple (Hoffer, Saul, and Foster, 2012).

Niacinamide, the form of niacin included in most multiple vitamins, will not induce a flush. Nevertheless, the small doses in your multiple would generally be deemed useless for helping alcoholism and psychiatric conditions. Moreover, high dose niacinamide is much more likely to cause nausea than niacin and won't lower cholesterol. Hoffer felt a no-flush alternative known as inositol hexanicotinate might be useful -- though not as effective as straight niacin -- but according to other practitioners the jury is still out on this supplement (Hoffer and Foster, 2008).

Niacin can be manufactured in the body from the amino acid tryptophan, but, here again, the dosage would be infinitesimal (Hoffer, Saul and Foster, 2012).

3. **Rumors niacin has a dark side.** Simply put: Health controversies surround all forms of niacin. Some experts assert that high dose niacin, especially timed-release formulas, can be damaging to the liver, while others alternative health practitioners are adamant the compound is liver protective (as well as a powerful longevity promoting nutrient). Dr. Abram Hoffer always insisted that B-3 was not liver toxic and that the only side effect of taking niacin was that you would live a lot longer. Hoffer -- who claimed to have taken high dose niacin longer than any person on the planet, lived to the ripe old age 91. Before he passed away Dr. Hoffer referenced Canadian Mary MacIsaac who had taken the vitamin in huge quantities for 42 years, passed away at age 112, and still practiced cross country skiing at age 110! Humphry Osmond lived to age 86 (Hoffer, Saul, and Foster, 2012).

Dr. Hoffer readily admitted that niacin often raises enzymes in liver function tests, but this is not necessarily a bad thing. Statins and some over the counter pain remedies will also raise levels (Hoffer, Saul, and Foster, 2012).

4. **Questions about the validity of Dr. Hoffer's research.** In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association stated that there were flaws in Dr. Abram Hoffer's studies. The organization could not replicate his data, and hence did not endorse niacin therapy (Lipton,1973).

5. **Niacin's association with schizophrenia.** Many of the studies and case histories surrounding niacin therapy focused on schizophrenia (Wilson, 1968). The underlying concept or implication that **all, most** or even **some** alcoholics might have schizophrenic tendencies might have been a turn off to many AA members . . . even those with MD or DO after their name.

6. **Bill Wilson promoted the idea to the wrong audience.** Had Bill Wilson brought his message to the masses (such as writing a popular book on the subject), rather than trying to recruit AA physicians, he might have had better success with the trend catching on. In his attempts to be as ethical as possible -- or just link the trend to AA -- he may have thwarted his own attempts to popularize niacin.

7. **Fears surrounding the practice of orthomolecular psychiatry.** The term Orthomolecular Psychiatry was coined by Linus Pauling in an article in *Science* (Pauling, 1968). Orthomolecular simply means using the appropriate molecule. Dr. Pauling is the only man in history to snare two unshared Nobel Prizes and the mastermind behind using high dose vitamin C therapy for everything from the common cold to cancer. This branch of medicine, often dubbed as "mega-vitamin therapy," stipulates that psychological and psychiatric problems can often be treated with nutritional remedies. Clearly, Dr's Hoffer, Osmond (both of whom greatly admired Pauling), and on occasion, Bill Wilson himself, were mavericks practicing this novel approach many years before the term was ever coined. The American Psychiatric Association has taken a dim view of orthomolecular psychiatry (Lipton, 1973). Jonathan V. Wright, M.D. (2012), a well-known alternative physician, notes that his office was raided by Food & Drug Administration (FDA) agents for prescribing nutraceuticals. Thus, even if a practitioner believes in orthomolecular psychiatry he or she may not verbalize this publicly for fear of losing their license or even going to prison! Moreover, it is likely that no insurance company or managed care firm would pay for this form of treatment.

8. **Criticism from special interest groups.** If somebody tried to resurrect the notion of mega-vitamin niacin therapy today it is highly likely that the major pharmaceutical giants (aka Big Pharma) as well as the major medical associations would step out against it. Medical assisted treatment using prescription drugs (such as Vivitrol for alcoholism) has become the norm, ahem, not to mention a very big buck business. Orthodox medicine, including physicians *and* Big Pharma, might also take the stance that since niacin can be purchased without a prescription, recommending this nutrient would encourage alcoholic clients and AA members to treat themselves with over the counter products from the local health food store or super market. The establishment's argument: playing Orthomolecular shrink with yourself can be dangerous.

9. **Bill Wilson's interest in questionable treatment modalities.** It is possible that Bill Wilson's studies and fascination with disciplines that were not mainstream, for example, LSD therapy and parapsychology (Hoffer, 2008), made hard-core scientists and treatment specialists question his credibility related to Vitamin B-3 treatment. Obviously, for some reason, these interests never seemed to hinder the popularity of the AA movement.

10. **His death from smoking.** Finally, there is the simplest hypothesis: It is possible that Bill Wilson, who passed away at age 75, merely died too early to finish his work.

**Bill Wilson's Legacy: AA or Vitamin B-3 Therapy?**

 **His Own Surprising Final Answer**

According to Abram Hoffer, Bill W. experienced severe depression before *and* after he stopped drinking. Unfortunately, even sobriety did not ameliorate his suffering. Niacin or vitamin B-3 therapy was the *only thing* that ever gave Bill relief (Hoffer, 2008). Before Bill Wilson passed away he was asked what he would like to be remembered for in the history books. Much to most people's chagrin he picked niacin therapy over AA (Kurtz, 1991).

**References**

Cheever, S. (1999, June 14) Persons of The Century. (1999). *Time*, *153*(23), 8-12

Cheever, S. (2005) *My Name Is Bill: Bill Wilson -- His Life and the Creation of Alcoholics Anonymous.* NY: Washington Square Press.

Hoffer, A. and Foster, H.D. (2007). *Feel Better, Live Longer With Vitamin B-3: Nutrient Deficiency and Dependency.* Toronto, CCNM Press.

Hoffer, A. [Abram Hoffer] (2008, Feb. 21). [Video file.] Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PH1\_v0zh\_gk

Hoffer, A., Saul A.W., & Foster H.D. & (2012) *Niacin The Real Story.* Laguna Beach, CA: Basic Health Publications.

Kurtz, E. (1991) *Not God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous.* Center City, MN: Hazelden Press.

Lipton, M.A. (1973) Task *Force Report on Megavitamin and Orthomolecular Therapy in* *Psychiatry*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Myers, D.G. (2010). *Psychology for AP.* Orange, VA: Worth Publishing.

Pauling, L. (1968) Orthomolecular Psychiatry, *Science* 160 265-271.

Saul, A.W. (2009) An Interview with Abram Hoffer. *Journal of Orthomolecular Medicine*. Vol. 24, No 3.

Wilson, B. (1965) *A communication to AA's physicians. Vitamin B-3 Therapy: A promising treatment for schizophrenia -- and its high relevance to the field of alcoholism.* Bedford Hills, NY: Private Publication.

Wilson, B. (1968) *A second communication to AA physicians.* Bedford Hills, NY: Private Publication.

Wilson, B. (1971) *Third communication to AA physicians. An updating progress report to the 1968 B3 booklet.* Bedford Hills, NY: Private Publication.

Wright, J. (2012) *Dr. Jonathan V. Wright, MD --Tahoma Clinic's Founder and Medical Director.* Retrived August 23, 2012, from <http://www.tahomaclinic.com/dr-jonathan-v-wright/.html>

Copyright 2025. Dr. Howard Rosenthal, General Guidance Group.