Problems related to alcohol and drug use are common among our patients. Traditionally, physicians have been trained to manage the medical complications of these behaviors and accordingly, the Medical Clinics of North America addressed this topic in the issue “Ethyl Alcohol and Disease,” in January 1984. But during the present period of rapid evolution in health care, we have been forced to re-examine the priorities we, as internists, address in our clinical practice. The emerging forces of primary care, a public health perspective to improved health outcomes, and the cost implications of patient and physician behaviors have supported the perspective that substance abuse problems must be addressed by practicing internists. Alcohol and drug abuse affect millions of people and cost billions of dollars in the United States; most of these people are patients in primary care practices.

The number of subspecialists in addiction medicine is small. Certainly the supply of such physicians would be overwhelmed if asked to provide all the care necessary to diagnose and support patients with substance abuse problems. Thus, internists and other primary care physicians will need to accept a large role in the care of such patients. Most physicians’ training has been limited to the care of hospitalized, seriously ill substance abusers. In this issue we hope to continue the education of physicians in the ambulatory care of this population. The longitudinal care of drug and alcohol abusers can be rewarding only if clinicians acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to provide care. As internists and primary care physicians, we have brought together state of the art reviews of clinical topics by national authorities in alcohol and drug abuse. We have endeavored to have each author provide practical insights that facilitate addressing the problems patients face regarding alcohol and other drug abuse in the generalist physician setting. We have encouraged the inclusion of evidence-based recommendations as well as clinical pearls. We have also asked authors to highlight their messages in tables. Thirteen articles have been selected after peer review for this issue. A broad spectrum of alcohol and drug abuse...
issues are addressed from screening to brief interventions, from physician counseling to pharmacologic strategies and nonpharmacologic treatment approaches. Special substance abuse issues among specific populations are also detailed in articles concerning women, geriatric patients, physicians, and patients with comorbid psychiatric disease. Three articles address systems aspects of the provision of care to patients with these problems: the generalist’s role, treatment matching, and managed care implications. In its entirety, this issue enables the physician, who was trained in an era when alcohol and other drug abuse were not in the purview of the generalist physician, to review the present state of the art and science.

This effort is all the more important when one realizes that the task of learning clinically relevant information about alcohol and drug abuse issues is difficult. When alcohol and drug abuse research findings and review articles are published, they often appear in substance abuse specialty journals. Unfortunately, unlike other specialty journals, many of the substance abuse journals are not found in our medical libraries. This issue is designed to address this gap in the medical literature.

Much credit for enabling physicians to write such an issue for the Medical Clinics of North America is given to the Center of Substance Abuse Prevention, of the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration, the Department of Health and Human Services. The federal agency has provided funding to over 30 health professional schools over the past 9 years to train academic faculty in the field of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug abuse (ATOD) prevention and treatment as part of the Faculty Development Programs in ATOD. All three editors of this volume were recipients of this support as were 12 of the 19 physician authors. This essential support continues to result in dissemination of a knowledge base to practicing clinicians about alcohol and other drug abuse.

We enjoy addressing these issues among our patients and are honored to be able to assemble such talented colleagues to produce a clinically relevant and useful issue of the Medical Clinics of North America.

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