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Boston University

News from Boston University Medical Center

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

A man under the influence of alcohol severely beats his wife. She files a complaint in district court, and a summons is issued to her husband. He appears in court, expecting to receive a suspended sentence or fine; she hopes for some form of punishment that might deter her husband from harming her again.

It's a typical case, one that has occurred countless times. Often, the offender is recommended for psychological evaluation and referred to a court-related mental-health clinic. But the treatment that is given rarely focuses on the real, underlying problem; alcoholism.

The problem has begun to be recognized, though. A \$100,000 Public Health Service grant was recently awarded to a unique service program of the Roxbury District Court Clinic--its alcoholism screening and referral project. The program, which addresses itself to the need for separate assessment of alcohol-related problems, is funded by the PHS grant through Boston University School of Medicine. Begun in 1974, the project is currently in its final year.

Now when an assault and battery case, a disturbance of the peace case, or other charge of the sort that frequently involves alcohol arises, judges at the Roxbury District Court can refer the offender directly to a member of the alcoholism screening team.

(more)

Donald R. Giller, Director/Owen J. McNamara, Senior Editor

A member of the project first interviews the offender. Results of that meeting are then evaluated by the entire screening team, which consists of project coordinator Sylvia Freed, who is a social worker, two other social workers, and a consulting psychiatrist. The team then makes a recommendation to the court, suggesting either that the offender begin treatment at the clinic, that he be referred to an outside agency, or that he be evaluated for another problem if alcoholism is not the cause. For referrals, the screening staff has developed a network of more than eight alcoholism agencies in Boston, including detoxification centers, halfway houses and outpatient services, all of which work closely with the court clinic and the court itself.

After the team's recommendation is returned to the court, the judge re-evaluates the case. The offender may be referred for help and the case continued without finding for one or two months while the client undergoes treatment, or a sentence may be imposed.

If the offender is sent to an outside agency, he must still report to the screening project regularly. The project works closely with probation officers, to keep within rules set by the court. If for some reason the client does not follow through with treatment, an appropriate report will be made to the court, and the offender will be resentenced. At the end of the client's suggested time of treatment, if he or she has undergone treatment faithfully, a report will be filed with the court by the screening project, and the case will again be presented before a judge.

"One of the most important services of the project is finding the problem that underlies the offense," says Freed, project coordinator. "We meet with the client's family to discover a reason for the client's behavior, or to uncover a past history of alcoholism. It's also important to us to counsel and evaluate the victim, if there is one, as in the case of wife-beating," she added. "There

(more)

may be a problem with the spouse that affects the client and his drinking problem. Also, if the beating is severe, the victim may need the counseling as much as the offender does," she continued. "We also do victim counseling in rape cases."

The court clinic and its alcoholism screening project are unusual, especially in their dealings with the community. There are very few courts which work so closely with such community agencies as detox centers. A member of the clinic staff or alcoholism screening staff appears in court with all cases.

In an interview that took place before his recent appointment as assistant commissioner for the clinical services division of the state's juvenile correction agency, James A. Wells, then executive director of the Roxbury Court clinic said: "An obligation that we take seriously, both here at the project and at the clinic as a whole, is to serve as a model for other court systems. We feel that we have a lot of unique experience to offer, which could undoubtedly improve other courts' effectiveness in dealing with their offenders."