

Highway Myway #1 is closed

If an addiction professional or support group member ever says, "My way or the highway," take comfort that, statistically, chances might be better on the highway.

That puckish but powerful advice from LifeRing Secular Recovery CEO Martin Nicolaus at an international conference here Saturday points to a 50-year study showing that while 40 per cent of people who recovered from addiction used AA or step programs, 60 per cent did not.

Sadly, the insights of Nicolaus and other experts on the value of having a range of options to treat substance abuse was missed by staff from a major local addiction service. And therein lies an ethical and public relations embarrassment, particularly in light of Mental Health Week, which trundled into town Monday with this year's pushcart of press kits and slogans.

Gone from town now are Nicolaus, a lawyer from Berkeley, Calif., Dr. Robert Warner, a U of T psychologist and head of Solution Focussed Therapy, Alan Ogborne, a noted consultant on effectiveness of different treatments for addiction, and psychotherapist Dr. Charlotte Kasl, author of *Many Roads, One Journey*.

They want the road to recovery to be less like a white-knuckled climb up the single, steep path to the lost Andean city of Macchu Picchu, and more like a self-charted, many-routed journey to Rome. An increasing number of professionals and fellow travellers, including AA and structured programs, see the wisdom of this direction.

As Warner said, motivation comes from hope, and helping people find and build their own hope "brings about the beginnings of tremendous change." As Kasl said: "People heal in very different ways. This is about lives. We're all in this together."

But it seems Homewood Addiction Drug Services and its Community Alcohol and Drug Services are stalled on Highway Myway #1. Some at HADS and CADS (an unfortunate acronym, surely) promote AA as the only road that

really works. They generally don't offer LifeRing meetings as an option. They wouldn't pay for, or encourage, staff to go to the conference, and none went, despite an offer of free passes for CADS and the presence of other agencies.

One official said they'd be uncomfortable at an event where they might be near a client. What better place to be? Especially a community-building event that includes experts, professionals, volunteers *and* people in recovery?

What better place to be - unless all the chitchat about "inclusiveness" and "community" is press kit bumph and blather, just slick enough to slide down a gullible reporter's throat?

If addiction can ultimately be a life threatening or terminal illness (its links to post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and other illnesses are known), then what of the ethics of informed consent to treatment? Of a publicly funded hospital or centre offering options as well as AA? Of staff at least checking out new tools?

Kudos to staff at a couple of other Homewood divisions, namely the Trillium and MacKinnon units, and to Ferguson's ACTT (Assertive Community Treatment Team) for attending LifeRing's pre-conference workshop to inform themselves.

Kudos to others for tipping off the press to the Chevy-vs.-Ford road rage on the recovery circuit.

And kudos to LifeRing conference organizer and local addictions counsellor Jason Kelly for trying to steer around the barriers on the potentially hazardous Hwy. Myway #1. Because when Nicolaus asked the audience how many knew someone who had died of addiction, three-quarters raised a hand.

This opinion piece is (in an ostensibly free-thinking society) the traditional journalistic smack upside the head for those pros who should know better. They know who they are, and so do I. So just fix this, don't call. Because my ever-smiling mug shot with this column is the exception to the rule that you can believe what you see in the newspaper.

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