



**Bears&Health/**  
Lawrence D. Mass, MD

At the national convention of the American Society of Addiction Medicine, held this year (April 28-May 1) at the Marriott Marquis Hotel in New York City, there was a poster exhibit that included a presentation summarizing some of the latest and very disheartening developments in areas of substance abuse prevalence, outreach and treatment in the gay community. The paper, entitled "Losing Ground: Substance Abuse and Gays," was co-authored by longtime gay health and addiction advocate George Marcelle, and Max A. Schneider, Chairman of the National Council on Alcohol and Drug Dependencies.

Bottom line: Even the most pessimistic of us who are involved in the field, and who had appreciated the recent work and perspectives of Gabriel Rotello and Michelangelo Signorile, had little idea how bad things have otherwise gotten. Twenty years since the initiation of multiple glbt community organizations and programs for treatment and recovery, we are, as the co-authors claim in their lead frame: "Losing Ground."

For starters, the National Lesbian and Gay Health Association, which celebrated its twentieth anniversary in San Francisco last summer, has cancelled its 1999 conference and suspended other operations. Organizational and financial troubles, apparently. There is talk of organizing anew, the first meetings of which are being planned for this summer in Boulder Colorado. Closer to

## **LOSING GROUND: SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND... BEARS?**

home for Marcelle, who is a board member of NALGAP (National Association of Gay and Lesbian Addiction Professionals), is the decline of that organization's membership, from a peak of over 400 in 1987, to less than 100 this year. Meanwhile, the situation of glbt persons vis a vis substance abuse, treatment and counseling is rapidly deteriorating. One of the main reasons for this, Marcelle believes, is because so many gay publications and events are sponsored by the manufacturers of alcoholic beverages. Marcelle bluntly correlates the downplaying of the seriousness of these issues in glbt communities with bar ownership/sponsorship of glbt publications. "Major community events all had alcohol sponsors," Marcelle and Schneider note in their presentation. "Three quarters of 25 lesbian/ gay organizations routinely served alcohol at most events they sponsored. One third reported alcohol/drug problems at these events." And a correlation was identified "between excessive crime rates and alcohol consumption, with lesbians/gays often the victims."

"Is this what I've worked so hard for over the past 20 years? – to be unable in 1999 to find treatment slots for my lesbian/gay clients where they won't be bashed for being gay or left in worse shape with their alcohol/drug problems than when I sent them?" asked Emily McNally, NALGAP co-founder, co-author (with Dana G. Finnegan) of *Dual Identities: Counseling Chemically-Dependent Gay Men and Lesbians*. Although there are still treatment and rehabilitation centers such as the Pride Institute that continue their primary outreach to the greater glbt community, one wonders how stable are their prospects, especially in light of managed care cutbacks.

Hopefully, the absence of any representation of The Pride Institute in the ASAM exhibit hall, which was otherwise dominated by rehab and therapeutic community center booths and representatives from all over the country (e.g.

The Betty Ford Center), was not an indicator.

So how pertinent is all this to us bears? Well, no one has yet really studied bears for patterns of substance abuse, or for much of anything else, for that matter, like the common health problems you'd expect from any group of men who are overweight. Because bears as a group tend to be somewhat older – there are so many of us who are middle-aged – I suspect that out-of-control drug use is less common among us, likewise the use of some of the most addictive drugs like cocaine and heroin, and the designer drugs you hear more about at the big circuit parties where the gym-body types predominate. But anyone who has ever been to a bear bust knows that we drink as much as any other group, often alcoholically. For those who can drink socially, alcohol can be a social lubricant and life-enhancer. It can even help prevent the development of arteriosclerosis (hardening of the arteries).

For those who drink excessively, however, there are few drugs more toxic, more destructive than alcohol. More on alcohol and other drugs in upcoming columns. For now, for starters, anyone wanting more information about glbt drug use and treatment options can get a great deal of information from the Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs Resource Guide specifically prepared for the glbt community by the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention. To get a free copy of this guide, write or call The National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI), P.O. Box 2345, Rockville, Md 20847-2345. Or call 1-800-729-6686.

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