

BOOK REVIEW

The Knotted Cord: An Update on Transgenerational Alcohol

Author: Kieran D. O'Malley (Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist, Slievemore Clinic, Dublin, Ireland)

His name was Robert. He was a diminutive Native American man who a few years ago spent time on the streets of downtown Seattle. I worked for close to four and a half decades in that community as a social worker. In the course of that experience I encountered many indigent, homeless, addicted and disabled individuals. Robert had an endearing childlike demeanor which could change when on occasion he consumed alcohol. He was often homeless and unemployed.

Regarding his background and family, he seemed to know very little or perhaps chose not to say much about it. He had a memorable appearance. Under a thick mop of dark hair parted in the middle, his face was normal on one side and very deformed on the other, as though half of his visage had melted. I would find out that his father was white and his mother was an indigenous woman. I don't believe that either parent had much of a hand in raising him. Robert died, probably before he reached his 30th birthday. Undoubtedly, he had endured the ravages of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome in the course of his brief life.

Dr. Kieran O'Malley, a noted child and adolescent psychiatrist, provides a sweeping and authoritative work on this tragic medical, psychological and social condition. Originally from Belfast, Ireland he spent nine years on the faculty at the University of Washington where he engaged in prison consultation in the cases of young offenders. He has practiced in Belfast and in Dublin. In addition to his professional psychiatric pursuits, O'Malley is steeped in the arts, having directed numerous plays and written four published books of poetry.

This impressive overview covers much that is presently understood about the deleterious impact a pregnant mother's alcohol consumption has on her developing fetus. An updated and expanded survey, this is much broader in scope than the original text which O'Malley admits focused significantly on Ireland and that country's "toxic romance" with drink. "Ireland was a true Alcohol Nation." He writes that it was in 1968 when the "teratogenic"—or physically deforming--implications of alcohol consumption during pregnancy were assessed by a pediatrician in France. In the intervening years, more thorough medical research and cultural investigation have demonstrated the depth and disruptive dimensions of the problem. The condition can manifest in ways other than physical deformity. O'Malley asserts: "The ghosts of past generations live within our children and our children's children." If we are to fully confront this widespread international challenge with effective and comprehensive treatments, it is imperative to grasp the "transgenerational" nature of the devastation.

Still there is a shocking deficiency in many places in bringing the distressing situation to light. While the "mother/infant, mother/child dyad relationship is the key nodal point for diagnosis and management," there persists a "conspiracy of silence" surrounding the subject. O'Malley refers to the way in which Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and its cognates have been relegated to a sort of "orphan" state within the medical labyrinth. All too common, judging, blaming and stigmatizing the alcoholic parents—especially the mother—of a fetal alcohol child further distorts any salubrious and therapeutic intervention. Systemic failures and insufficiencies abound leaving mothers and fathers and their afflicted child with

few if any resources to cope with their misfortune. This can be compounded by an atmosphere of poverty, despair, violence and quotidian unpredictability rife in such environments pervaded by mental illness, addiction and alcohol abuse.

An undeniable and critical component perpetually at work in this multifaceted amalgam is the colossal influence of the alcohol industry, a most profitable enterprise. Slick advertisements invite and inveigle everyone to quaff a pint of the Black Brew, sip a glass of fine wine, down a shot of the hard stuff or savor a bottle of one's favorite lager. Of course, the dark side of alcohol consumption never makes it onto any media come-on to drink. This is abetted by the obvious cultural relevance--and wide acceptance--of alcoholic beverages in many societies. According to O'Malley, anyone in the United States today wishing to adopt a Russian baby cannot legally do so. It has been determined that a disproportionate number of those unfortunate children are affected by Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. Vodka has long been Russia's ubiquitous national libation. It is a most potent spirit indeed. In my own experience as a social worker, vodka was the drink of choice for many in the latter stages of hard core alcoholism.

O'Malley's offering is a rich trove of information and insight about an urgent public health, economic and societal crisis. He makes clear that there are creative and effective ways to assist children, teens, parents and anyone else within the ambience of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome's reach. What is sorely lacking in too many places are comprehensive and consistently funded systems, properly staffed programs that can address the various aspects of this exigent need. This is a volume that should be of interest to not only professionals in the medical, mental health and social work fields, but also any concerned citizen who wishes to educate themselves about the subject.

The primary and glaring lesson from the book is clear and direct: Any woman who is pregnant should immediately abstain from imbibing any form of alcohol as soon as she knows of her pregnancy.

I would add that given the amount of information contained in the book, a glossary of medical and technical terms would be most helpful to the reader.

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