



STORY SLUG: DRINKING: ARE YOU IN CONTROL? DEBATE OVER TREATMENTS FOR ALCOHOLISM

PRODUCER:..... ABC NEWS

INTERVIEWER: DR. NANCY SNYDERMAN

SPEAKERS:

DR NANCY SNYDERMAN (ABC NEWS), MARC KERN (NANCY SNYDERMAN), LAURA BAUGH, DR FRED GLASER, KEN, CROWD (MAN), RICKY HIGGINS (DRINKING: ARE YOU IN CONTROL?, 1ST MAN, 2ND MAN), SPORTSCASTER, CURTIS BURKE, BOY (3RD MAN, 1ST WOMAN), DR ENOCH GORDIS, DR ALAN MARLATT, MARK KERN, PETER HAMILL (ENOCH GORDIS), RICHARD BANTON (TEXT:, FRED GLASER, ALAN MARLATT), POLICE OFFICER, FRANCES WARREN, DR NICK HEATHER (NICK HEATHER), LORIAN HEMMINGWAY (4TH MAN), PETER JENNINGS (ABC NEWS, PETER JENNINGS), FRANK ERVIN, ROBERTA PALMOUR (5TH MAN), GAME ANNOUNCER, MONROE HIGGINS, ELIZABETH STERNS (2ND WOMAN, 5TH MAN, GIVE ME A BREAK!, DEBBIE KASSAY, SALESMAN, GIRL, OFFICER BOB WALL, BOB WALL, 5TH WOMAN, BOY, 6TH WOMAN, BRIAN ROSS, ABC NEWS, SAMMY SOSA, OPERATION BULLPEN, BRIAN ROSS, ABC NES, BRIAN ROSS, TONY GWYNN, TEEN, KATHIE LEE GIFFORD, TEXT:, TARA SETMAYER, WILLIAM COHEN, LISA BENNENSON, ELINOR BURKETT, THE BABY BOON, GROUP OF PEOPLE, ELISA KEYS, CHILDLESS, 1ST OFFSCREEN VOICE, 2ND OFFSCREEN VOICE, JENNIFER ELLIS, CHILDLESS, 3RD OFFSCREEN VOICE, JENNIFER ELLIS, WENDY RYALS, CHILDLESS, JAN WILSON, PARENT, LESLIE FRIEDMAN, PARENT, JAN WILSON, TEXT:, 4TH WOMAN, SUSAN DUFFY, JESSICA KELLEY, PARENT, JESSICA KELLEY, JULIE BOYD, PARENT, SCOTT WENZEL, CHILDLESS, ELISA KEYS, TINA KELLER, PARENT, ANN LANGLEY, LORI COPELAND, CHILDLESS, 3RD MAN, LORI COPELAND, 5TH WOMAN, TINA KELLER, JULIE BOYD, 4TH OFFSCREEN VOICE, WENDY RYALS, 4TH MAN, GIVE ME A BREAK!, 6TH WOMAN, CHRIS GALEN, NATIONAL MILK PRODUCERS FEDERATION, ROB BYRNE)

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TAPE: 1ANNOUNCER

From ABC News, around the world and into your home, the stories that touch your life, this is a special edition of 20/20.

DR NANCY SNYDERMAN, ABC NEWS

Tonight, dramatic revelations about alcoholism, and a look at controversial new treatments. Imagine telling an alcoholic, 'Can you get sober and still drink?'

MARC KERN

I was hurting. I was hooked. And I'm not today. And I do drink.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

For decades, Alcoholics Anonymous and treatment centers have been preaching total abstinence as the way to control this devastating addiction. That's what saved the life of this champion golfer.

LAURA BAUGH

Blood came out of my eyes and my nose and my fingernails and my ears.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

But now there's a daring alternative that says you may not have to give up drinking. When you introduced this, were you met with rounds of applause?

DR FRED GLASER

Not exactly.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

Are you ready for the new thinking about alcoholism?

KEN

My name's Ken, and I'm an alcoholic.

CROWD

[In unison] Hi, Ken.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

In America, we call it a disease. But most other countries don't. Neither does this man, who almost drank himself to death.

MAN

They told me that I had a disease. I just thought it was ridiculous.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

Does alcoholism run in families?

RICKY HIGGINS

I had only planned on having a little, you know, but once I got started, I couldn't stop.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

And shouldn't we try new ways to treat alcoholics? Join us for a groundbreaking perspective on the 50 million Americans who struggle with alcohol. DRINKING: ARE YOU IN CONTROL?

[SEGMENT BREAK] [EOF999]

DRINKING: ARE YOU IN CONTROL?

ANNOUNCER Here now, Dr. Nancy Snyderman.

DR NANCY SNYDERMAN, ABC NEWS

Good evening. As this program begins, think of someone you know who drinks too much. We all know someone, a spouse, one of our children, a friend at work, maybe it's you. Nearly one out of five Americans is a problem drinker. For some who seek help, the traditional road to recovery, Alcoholics Anonymous, is the answer. But for many others it's a dead end. So where do they turn? Well, now bold, new voices are challenging everything we've been told about alcoholism, including how to treat it. If you think every alcoholic must swear off drinking forever, then you're in for a surprise. But first, a rare invitation to witness an AA meeting in progress. The idea conceived by two men trying to cope with their own alcoholism has become a model for a vast 12-step network that, until now, has become the only accepted treatment in this country.

1ST MAN

Serenity prayer:

CROWD

[In unison] God, grant me the strength to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

KEN

My name's Ken and I'm an alcoholic.

CROWD

[In unison] Hi, Ken.

KEN

I started when I was 13 years old. I didn't quit until I was 41. I tried and everybody else tried everything that they knew to help me. And they couldn't. They didn't know how to deal with my disease.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Most Americans, like these AA members, believe alcoholism is a disease. But is it?

2ND MAN

They told me that I had a disease and that I was powerless over alcohol and drugs and that I could never drink again. I just thought it was ridiculous. It's a habit, behavior.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] And most Americans believe that total abstinence forever, the goal of all 12-step programs, is the only treatment. But is it?

MARC KERN

No one has stood up and said, 'Hogwash. This doesn't work. Or does work, but it only works for 10 to 15 percent of the population that have problems.'

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] You probably thought the issue was settled. After all, the American Medical Association labeled alcoholism a disease half a century ago. But many experts say calling it a disease wasn't necessarily for medical reasons, but a way to take away the shame of being an alcoholic instead. Alcoholics weren't weak or morally lacking, they were sick.

LAURA BAUGH

Well, if you get somebody sober, I'll call it anything they want.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Laura Baugh is 44, a mother of seven, and a recovering alcoholic.

LAURA BAUGH

The thing is that, in my opinion, I have a disease. A brutal, brutal disease. It will kill you slowly. It's 100 percent, it will kill you.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] When she was just 16, Laura exploded on the pro-golf scene. Her talent and looks earned her lots of attention, lots of endorsements and lots of money. [Clip from toothpaste commercial shown]

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Her alcoholism grew slowly, one glass of wine at a time. She says it helped her cope with a bad marriage and the expanding family she had to support.

LAURA BAUGH

It was my friend, it was my lover, it was my pal. It was everything.

SPORTSCASTER

[From file footage] Laura now ready to hit her second shot under 17.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Near the end, she was drinking every 45 minutes. Without alcohol, her hand shook so much she couldn't swing a club. Four years ago, Laura began hemorrhaging horribly. The alcohol had destroyed her blood's ability to clot.

LAURA BAUGH

Blood came out of my eyes and my nose and my fingernails and my ears. Black and blue marks where pockets of blood were in my body. My brothers flew in to say goodbye. And for four days I was very sober and aware that no matter what I did, I would probably not live. [To her children] OK, all aboard.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Against all odds, she did live. Her family took her to a 12-step clinic for treatment, and she continues to attend meetings each week.

LAURA BAUGH

I work a very strong 12-step program. If I don't do that, I die.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Curtis Burke agrees. He spent 20 years of his life abusing alcohol. He stole, he ended up in jail. Neither had an effect on his drinking. He just went from treatment center to treatment center.

CURTIS BURKE

After 13 detoxifications, I -- I stopped counting.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] On the birth of his first child, Curtis went to the hospital and wound up cursing his son's mother.

CURTIS BURKE

That was my bottom. That behavior to me was totally unacceptable and uncalled for. Everything that was beautiful, everything that had some potential to be life-fulfilling, that I continually destroyed it.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] It was July, 1988. He went to AA and continues to attend two or three meetings a week. Curtis says he hasn't had a drop since.

CURTIS BURKE

AA, I wouldn't have a life without it.

BOY

Back right. Definitely.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Curtis Burke and Laura Baugh are among the millions of alcoholics who have attended AA and similar programs and made them work. But they are the exceptions. Most people who go to AA never go back. What you are seeing here, an actual AA meeting, has rarely been seen before. AA desires no publicity, keeps no records and demands anonymity. But in a rare and controversial move, after alerting members in advance our cameras would be there, one group invited us in. Their comments reflect the members' views, not AA's.

3RD MAN

In fact, I went into a bar with about \$1,000. I closed the door. I said, everybody drinks until I die. I didn't die. They threw me out when I was broke.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] The disease is said to be chronic and progressive, with a loss of control over drinking and a craving for alcohol.

1ST WOMAN

I went from being a welfare mother, living with my own mother. Now I have a great relationship with my kids. And I just bought a home. And I'm just real, real grateful for this program and all you people here. Thanks.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Of AA's 12 steps to sobriety, two are key: admitting powerlessness over alcohol and turning yourself over to a higher power. All the steps help support the goal, a lifetime of abstinence.

CROWD

[In unison] Keep coming back. It works if you work it. One day at a time.

DR ENOCH GORDIS

The 12-step program that is AA essentially, founded by Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob in 1935, is one of the really incredible genius creations of the 20th century.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Dr. Enoch Gordis heads the NIH's National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. He says AA deserves all the praise it gets. And no one doubts its power to transform lives and save millions. But is AA the only way to sobriety? According to many researchers, some of AA's views are too rigid and unscientific. Dr. Alan Marlatt, an alcoholism expert at the University of Washington, is one of them.

DR ALAN MARLATT

Some people call it a cult. I would call it a strong ideology. It's based on a spiritual fellowship idea. And they're a little resistant to -- to those of us who are doing scientific research that might challenge or question some of the basic assumptions that they've come up with. We keep saying, 'The research doesn't really support this, so maybe you ought to think about the policy and change it in some way.' No. Be like trying to change the Ten Commandments or something.

MARC KERN

Most therapists, even today, see it as a psychological problem. If asked, maybe, to be on camera, would they say it's a disease, they would say yes. But no one believes it. No one really believes it. Not in their heart of hearts, even the people with the addictions.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Psychologist Mark Kern was once one of those people. His alcohol dependence and drug problems began in his college fraternity.

MARC KERN

I graduated Ohio State University with a degree in architecture, and a degree in bad habits.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Over the next 10 years, he progressed to a point so severe that he suffered grand mall seizures during withdrawal. He tried therapists.

MARC KERN

They sent me to psychologist A and psychologist B and and psychologist C. And everybody said they knew what they were doing. But I never learned how to control my feelings, to deal with life without -- without the elixirs.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] He tried AA. The philosophy made absolutely no sense to him.

MARC KERN

There's nothing medical being conveyed in there. It's a social, psychological support group. What kind of a disease is treated that way?

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] There were no treatment programs to help skeptics like him. So Kern devised his own. He decided to try a drink.

MARC KERN

I took a deep breath, with all these little voices in the back of my head. And I said, you know, 'I'm going to do it.'

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] The little voices were the powerful ideas the 12-step programs preach. One drink and you will be back in the gutter. But he found he could take a sip and put it down.

MARC KERN

As I continued to experiment with drinking, the fears that the AA community put into me seemed to drift.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] He went back to school for a PhD and a new career helping others with addictions by giving them choices not available to him. He believes millions more alcoholics would seek help if they had options. But he says the 12-step way has a stranglehold on treatment.

MARC KERN

People who dominate the treatment field of addictions have traditionally gone through the 12-step program. And their whole identity is based on holding on to this model, this -- this belief in the gospel, we'll call it. And they are afraid to step out of the box and look at what the research is telling them.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] And the research is saying, some alcoholics can learn to drink responsibly. Marc Kern is living proof. He has been enjoying a glass of wine for the past 20 years. And he fervently believes many of his patients should have the same choice. That philosophy made him a maverick and a pariah.

MARK KERN

I'm considered the anti-Christ in my community. If you look at what I say, they can't say, 'Well, you don't know.' But I do know. I was hurting. I was scared. I was hooked. And I'm not today. And I do drink. It's a good day, good day.

PETER HAMILL

I didn't join Alcoholics Anonymous. I didn't seek out other help. I just stopped. My goal was provisional and modest. One month without drinking. For the first few weeks, this wasn't easy. I had to break the habits of a lifetime. [Commercial break]

ANNOUNCER

DRINKING: ARE YOU IN CONTROL? with Dr. Nancy Snyderman continues.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

Just what is an alcoholic? Not everyone agrees. Alcoholism is not a medical term. And there's no lab test for it. But it's generally defined as a loss of control, not knowing when or how to stop drinking. Alcoholism affects a person's health and the ability to function at work and at home. Often, it includes an increasing tolerance for large amounts of liquor and, sometimes, actual physical dependence on it. But many people who don't fit all these criteria can still have problems with alcohol. And their problems often, tragically, become ours. [VO] Alcohol's impact on our society is staggering. It is involved in half of all hospital emergency-room visits, 70 percent of child-abuse cases, 52 percent of rapes, 86 percent of homicides, 75 percent of all domestic assaults, and 40 percent of all traffic deaths, 16,000 a year.

ENOCH GORDIS

With alcohol costing more and killing more than all of illegal drugs combined, with beer being the number one drug of choice among adolescents, with 100,000 deaths from alcohol a year, with one out of every four beds in urban hospitals being occupied by people being treated for the consequences of drinking, one would think that this would occupy national attention in a very big way. And yet, it doesn't.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] And yet it doesn't, despite the fact that almost 50 million people struggle with alcohol problems. Though alcoholism experts distinguish between different types of problems, from mild to moderate to severe, most counselors and treatment centers don't. They lump everyone together, casting such a wide net that anyone with an alcohol problem gets caught in it. And for all these different degrees of severity, the treatment industry offers a single drastic, one-size-fits-all solution, a lifetime of abstinence.

MARK KERN

We're a very moralistic country. We don't even want to give people the options.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Those who do try 12-step programs often don't stick with them. Even AA estimates that 95 percent of those who begin going to meetings drop out. In other clinics, the relapse rate is almost as discouraging, ranging from 50 to 70 percent. And those who leave have no other place to go.

RICHARD BANTON

The first step of treatment is to convince you that your compulsive behavior is a disease and that you have it. That's the first step of every treatment center in the United States virtually.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Richard Banton struggled with severe alcohol and drug problems for years. He finally became so dependent he needed a drink in the morning to get going and more all day long to keep from shaking. By the time he was 30, he wanted to die.

RICHARD BANTON

I'd just drink around the clock and pass out, and wake up and drink some more and was hallucinating a little bit, and sweating and vomiting. I was trying to drink myself to death.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

After years of drinking and drugging, he finally went to AA. He followed the program for six years, but felt like a misfit.

RICHARD BANTON

They told me that the end of people who do not accept the AA way of life is jails, institutions and death. You're kind of terrorized into, you know, falling in line. Anytime you say anything that conflicts with, you know, their model, then you're in denial.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

Banton stayed sober in AA, but he was miserable.

RICHARD BANTON

In AA, it was kind of a us and them thing, you know? I mean, they're not like us out there, those normal people who can drink. And I wanted to be out there with the rest of the normal people.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Searching for a solution, he found that some experts considered alcoholism not a life long disease but behavior that could be changed.

RICHARD BANTON

I felt free of the label of alcoholic. I strongly believed that I would be able to control myself.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] He didn't know of any programs in his native West Virginia to help. So he experimented. At first, he sometimes drank too much and woke up with a hangover.

RICHARD BANTON

I would suffer as a result. And I would adjust, calibrating what was safe to drink, what was responsible to drink.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] For the past three years, he has been drinking without a problem, without getting drunk.

RICHARD BANTON

Maybe once or twice a week at the most. And one or two drinks, usually, at the most.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

He got a master's degree in social work so he could council others with addiction problems. But he works in a clinic for adolescents, wedded to the disease theory he rejects. He thinks he will pay a price for doing this interview.

RICHARD BANTON

I expect that I will lose my job from doing this. I think that the -- the disease model is harmful to people.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Dr. Fred Glaser, an expert in addiction medicine at East Carolina University, believes that outmoded ideas about alcoholism actually hurt some people's chances for recovery.

TEXT:

For resources: 2020.abcnews.com

DR FRED GLASER

There has been this idea of hitting bottom, that a person isn't going to be motivated for treatment unless dreadful things happen to them. I don't think that's really true.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] He runs one of the few alternatives to 12-step programs in this country, called DrinkWise. The \$500 course teaches problem drinkers to reduce their drinking. Dr. Glaser says it has a 75 percent success rate.

FRED GLASER

One of the things we do is to have them chart their drinking very carefully, not only how much they drank but when they did it, whom they were with, and what they were thinking at the time.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

It's like a food diary?

FRED GLASER

Yes. It's exactly the same. Then they begin to think of ways of coping with particular situations or with particular thoughts.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

When you introduced this, were you met with rounds of applause?

FRED GLASER

Not exactly.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

Because?

FRED GLASER

Because what we were doing didn't conform to their idea of what ought to be done.

ALAN MARLATT

I was called the devil because I was mentioning something about alternatives to abstinence. That's basically -- I was questioning the party line.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Dr. Marlatt says the very idea of abstinence keeps more alcoholics out of treatment.

ALAN MARLATT

All they think of is, 'that requires me to be 100 percent abstinent starting on day one. I'm not ready for that.'

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] He says that by offering programs that do not stress abstinence as the end goal, we could reach a larger number of alcoholics. Offering controlled drinking programs may entice alcoholics to take that first step toward treatment.

POLICE OFFICER

At this time I'm placing you under arrest.

ALAN MARLATT

Rather than me try to shove abstinence goals into everybody who comes in for help with a drinking problem, what can we still do to begin to make progress and get the person on board?

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] While the goal of moderation brings them in the door, often they end up choosing abstinence later on.

ALAN MARLATT

Thirty to 40 percent of them end up quitting two or three years after they started the program. But then when they were asked, would they have initially selected an abstinence program, 'No.'

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] We were surprised to learn that the United States is one of the few Western countries where options are so hard to find. It turns out that by crossing the Atlantic, you also cross a great divide in the alcohol wars. Most Europeans view alcohol problems differently than we do here. In England, for example, alcoholism is defined as a behavioral problem, not a disease. And teaching people to moderate their drinking, so controversial here, is accepted there. FRANCES WARREN [ph] [From video tape] Chinese New Year, the year of the dragon. Unit number one.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Meet Frances Warren. No, she's not Sister Francis. She's a retired widow from Newcastle upon Tyne who loves an evening out with friends, as can you see in her home video. This night she's at a costume party counting out the alcohol units she will be allowed to drink. And as Frances is the first to tell you, she has always liked her liquor. [OC] How many drinks a week would you say?

FRANCES WARREN

Probably six per evening. But when I say six, if they are tall, they are quite large drinks.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

So, what I call a double?

FRANCES WARREN

Maybe three quarters of a bottle of whiskey.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] It was easy to do without even thinking. Sitting alone every night in front of her television, she poured drink after drink from the bottle by her side. One evening, a few years ago, she lit a candle and then dozed off while it smoldered and smoked.

FRANCES WARREN

And when I woke up, I had this black face and the table was just burned. And that really scared me.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] That, coupled with years of daily blackouts and missing work because of hangovers, convinced Frances she needed help. [OC] Do you think you had a disease?

FRANCES WARREN

Well, in England like 'disease,' it's not a word that people use. If I wanted an excuse, it would have been the ideal excuse. Wouldn't it? I have got a disease. I have an illness. But it -- it was not what I wanted to hear. I wanted to hear a problem. I can cope with problems.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Frances never considered stopping.

FRANCES WARREN

It's the idea of somebody saying, you can't ever have that again. And especially if it's something that you enjoy. It wouldn't have worked for me.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] She kept a diary and counted her alcohol units, the way dieters count calories. She's allowed 28 units a week. The equivalent of two glasses of wine a day. She saves some up for special occasions like this. Tonight, she's allowing herself eight units or four glasses of wine.

FRANCES WARREN

[From tape] Hello, Carl, it's Frances. I'm now on eight units. I will take my 28 units and enjoy them. Because really, when you are on that last unit, it tastes good.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Dr. Nick Heather runs the treatment program that helped Frances. One of England's top alcohol researchers, he says the disease theory is wrong.

DR NICK HEATHER

It's a circular concept. You know, 'Why does somebody drink so much?' 'Because they have a disease of alcoholism.' 'How do you know they have a disease of alcoholism?' 'Because they drink a lot.' That's not an explanation.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] In Great Britain, most treatment centers offer controlled drinking programs. Why not here in America? Heather says one reason for the hostility is money.

NICK HEATHER

There's a huge treatment industry in the USA which would have a great deal to lose by any move away from the -- from the disease concept.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] AA is free to all. But other 12-step treatment programs amount to a \$7 billion a year industry. And insurance pays for most of it.

MARC KERN

By calling it a disease, we can classify it as something medical and therefore the insurance companies will pay for it.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] But the treatment industry isn't even reaching the vast majority of people with alcohol problems. And experts say when it fails with those it does reach, it blames them.

ALAN MARLATT

So we could say they're all denial, or we could say from a consumers perspective, we haven't reached them with the right methods about how they can get some help.

TEXT:

Walk on Water Lorian Hemmingway

LORIAN HEMMINGWAY

I knew by now that I would kill to have it. I remember when it would come to me that, yes, I could murder for it. I had thought then in this rage of ramming a gun up hard against someone's temple and saying 'Get me what I need, now.' And if they said 'No, I won't do it,' I would blow a hole straight through their brain. [Commercial break]

ANNOUNCER

Chat live with Dr. Nancy Snyderman and experts from 12-step and alternative programs tonight at midnight Eastern time at 2020.abcnews.com. DRINKING: ARE YOU IN CONTROL? continues after this from our ABC stations. [Commercial break]

ANNOUNCER

DRINKING: ARE YOU IN CONTROL? with Dr. Nancy Snyderman continues.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

When I mention alcoholism, I find that most people assume medical science has the whole thing figured out. They think an alcoholic `falls in love' with that first drink, that his or her brain chemistry or metabolism is different. They believe that a gene for alcoholism has been discovered, that if your mother or father is an alcoholic, you will be, too. Well, not necessarily. It's time to re-examine some of these widely-held beliefs. [VO] First metabolism. People do metabolize alcohol differently. For instance, many Asians have a less active form of the enzyme that breaks down alcohol. So they get a flushing reaction when they drink, red face and nausea. Since they feel sick, they drink less. And Asian alcoholism rates are low. But it turns out that American Indians have the same flushing reaction, and their alcoholism rates are sky high. Different metabolism, different enzyme levels, different alcoholism rates. They are not the answer here. [VO] Next, what about the notion that alcoholics fall in love with liquor from their very first drink? Certainly not most alcoholics. Certainly not Laura Baugh.

LAURA BAUGH

Hated it. Scooted across the table a little bit, and didn't touch it.

ENOCH GORDIS

But there are exceptions to this. There are people who begin to drink, have met their true love instantly, and from then on the path is very rapid.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] But the majority of alcoholics don't report this. In most people, alcoholism develops over many years. There is no instant click with the first drink. [VO] Third, brain chemistry. Is there a so-called craving brain?

ENOCH GORDIS

This is our first attempt to see if we can see a craving.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Does an imbalance in brain neuro transmitters lead to alcoholism by creating an irresistible urge for alcohol? Researchers haven't seen it yet, though they are looking.

ENOCH GORDIS

We believe the craving comes from the brain. This hunger for this substance which is abnormal in the alcoholic is one of the major efforts that we do in research these days.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

But others believe craving is the result of learning.

MARC KERN

I believe you can teach a brain to crave. You can you teach it to expect something at 6:00 every single night. I don't think you are born with that propensity.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] With alcoholics, does one drink lead to another, and another, to a loss of control? It's an idea engrained in 12-step programs. But when Dr. Marlatt tested alcoholics to see if they did lose control, it turned out of it the expectation of alcohol that created craving, not the alcohol itself.

ALAN MARLATT

If they thought they were getting alcohol, they drank more whether they got it or not. If they didn't think they were getting it, they drank far less, even though half of them were actually getting alcohol.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] He performed a different experiment to see how expectation affected the mood of non-alcoholic college students several years ago. He gathered them in the university's bar lab to have a few beers. And he asked them to keep track of how they felt as they drank.

ALAN MARLATT

Is that typical for you when you drink?

4TH MAN

Yeah.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] They get louder. They laugh more. They flirt. They relax. All the reasons people like to drink. When the experiment ended, the students found out they didn't have any alcohol at all. They were drinking non-alcoholic beer.

ALAN MARLATT

None of the beverages you consumed tonight had any alcohol in them.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] The belief they were drinking alcohol was enough to make them behave as if they were. So not only is craving influenced by expectation, but mood can be as well.

PETER JENNINGS, ABC NEWS

[From file footage] In a moment the possibility of a genetic link as a factor in alcoholism.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Finally, the question of heredity and the discovery of the alcohol gene.

PETER JENNINGS

[File footage] Researchers say today that, for the first time, they have discovered a gene that appears linked to alcoholism.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] It was national news in 1990 when researchers said they had found it. But when the discovery was discounted, it didn't make the front pages. Many people still haven't learned that the widely-reported discovery of an alcohol gene was wrong. Scientists don't believe a single gene determines alcoholism. Instead, they think it is a complex behavior with many genes playing a part in the tendency to drink. Dr. Gordis says that they have located suspect regions on many chromosomes. [OC] What, particularly, precisely, is inherited? Where is the proof right now as to what is passed from one family member to another?

ENOCH GORDIS

We don't have that. That's exactly what we're looking for. We may find that some of these genes make people more or less sensitive to environmental influences. Pressures to drink from the family, from peers, from society from advertising and so on.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] The tendency to drink can sometimes be passed through the genes. But most children of alcoholics do not become alcoholic themselves, although they do have a higher risk of developing a problem. Many labs are looking at alcohol and genetics and it turns out we humans aren't the only ones who like a nip now and then. St. Kitts, the Caribbean, one of its main attractions is its huge colony of green monkeys and some of them like to drink. Geneticists Roberta Palmour and her colleague Frank Ervin of McGill University have been studying them for years because their drinking habits are similar to ours. Some are abstainers. Some are light drinkers and some are alcoholics. This monkey, Roger, was one of the scientists' first drinkers. Fourteen years ago they found out that he liked to hit the bottle more than the others. He would drink until he passed out. Roger was definitely an alcoholic.

FRANK ERVIN

Perfect.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] We asked the scientists to set up an experiment for us. In the first cage they put seven monkeys whose parents were not heavy drinkers. In the second cage, five of the seven had parents who drank heavily. All the monkeys in both cages had the same access to a solution of water and 10 percent rum. In the first cage, everything is under control. The monkeys drink but no one gets bombed. They do the usual monkey things: play fighting and resting.

ROBERTA PALMOUR

We saw a lot of scuffling around but it was -- it was sort of good-natured. We didn't see any fights that were ugly.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] But back at cage two, all hell is breaking loose. Here they are lining up at the bar, or bottle. Two monkeys in particular are staggering and falling off the poles. And they fight. Of this group, only one prefers water to rum.

FRANK ERVIN

Bunch of drunks. This is a bar scene right out of Old West, isn't it?

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] The two worst offenders are, that's right, Roger's children. But remember the monkey who didn't drink at all? He is also Roger's son. Genetics is not destiny in monkeys or humans.

ROBERTA PALMOUR

So not every animal or person who has alcoholic parents will themselves inherit that vulnerability.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] All we know about the monkeys is that the children of alcoholics drink more than those of nondrinkers. But they are locked in a cage with nothing else to do. Would they seek alcohol in another environment? And if we could teach them drinking were bad for them, would they stop? Curiously in that regard, they are smarter than humans.

FRANK ERVIN

Unlike man, they seem to have the sense to quit drinking before they kill themselves truly with cirrhosis of the liver.

5TH MAN

Night after night, the same people gathered in this hole in the wall fearful of missing something, same drunks, same talk, same place at the same bar. The alcohol convincing us all that we were active, vital people living life to the fullest degree. And it was there I earned the glowing approval of a large number of people, most of them supine now under the sod for failed livers and brains. [Commercial break]

ANNOUNCER

20/20, the winner of over 350 awards for excellence in broadcast journalism, now always on, on abcnews.com for more of the stories, interactive features and live chats, go to 20/20.abcnews.com [Commercial break]

ANNOUNCER

We continue now with DRINKING, ARE YOU IN CONTROL? Here is Dr. Nancy Snyderman.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

Alcoholism can run in families. If your parents are alcoholic, your risk of becoming one yourself increases. What does that risk, that tendency toward alcoholism mean? And what really causes it? Too many families learn the answer painfully, firsthand. [VO] Ricky Higgins' [ph] family is riddled with alcoholism. His father and grandfather were alcoholics and several close relatives had drinking problems. By the age of 17, Ricky was drinking three or four nights a week and it almost cost him his life. He was behind the wheel of his car.

RICKY HIGGINS

Because I had only planned on having a little. You know? But once I got started, I couldn't stop.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Drunk, he smashed head-on into a tree.

RICKY HIGGINS

I wasn't breathing and didn't have a pulse line when I was pulled out of the car and there was an off-duty paramedic or dispatcher behind me that, like, saved my life.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Ricky was born to shoot hoops. Just weeks before his accident, he helped lead his team to a triumphant second place in the Illinois State finals.

GAME ANNOUNCER

And they are cheering this guy. Ricky Higgins, 5, 11 junior; 15 yesterday. 15 more today.

RICKY HIGGINS

The state finals is something I will remember probably for the rest of my life. We accomplished it when no one thought we could. Just a little team from Lake County.

GAME ANNOUNCER

Nice job. He is excited.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] When did you realize you were an alcoholic?

RICKY HIGGINS

I'm not sure on that but I know that alcohol gets me in a lot of trouble. I mean I been -- I almost died from it.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] His parents and the family doctor believe Ricky is an alcoholic. His family says he inherited the problem. His father, Monroe, [ph] who drank heavily most of his life, has now been sober for seven years.

MONROE HIGGINS

I had no problem sitting down and having 12 glasses of beer. I drank until they threw me out of a place or I ran out of money.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] His parents divorced when Ricky was young. Elizabeth Sterns [ph] didn't want her children to follow in their father's footsteps. Ricky did anyway. After the accident, his school kicked Ricky off the basketball team. His drinking violated the athletic code. It was a devastating blow. His high school career over, his dreams of a sports scholarship in ruins. But was the drinking that caused his car crash his fault? [VO] You believe it's an inherited trait?

ELIZABETH STERNS

I believe it is genetic. Why would somebody drink themselves to the point of death? Unless there was something bigger than themselves.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] The Higgins family sued to get their son back on the team. They say his alcoholism is an inherited disease. The public didn't buy it. The case caused a furor, complete with angry editorials and hate mail.

ELIZABETH STERNS

It was a terrible price our family paid.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

The judge dismissed the suit. Ricky has attended AA meetings and no longer drinks but he is sitting out his senior year.

RICKY HIGGINS

I almost lost everything for a night of fun. Why?

MARC KERN

I think there's great danger in -- in -- in assuming that just because your father or your mother had an alcohol problem that you are going to have one. It's a very much a self-fulfilling prophecy.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Experts believe that whatever genes Ricky may or may not have inherited, they only set the stage, predisposing him to abusing alcohol. They did not make him alcoholic.

ENOCH GORDIS

You are not destined to become an alcoholic, even if you have the genes, because the genes are for risk and they're not for destinies. Any one of the genes alone contributes a partial amount to this risk.

FRED GLASER

The people who feel most positively about genetics, even they will say, perhaps 40 percent. That means that 60 percent of behavior is not accounted for by genetic factors.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] What contributes the rest? Environment. Just ask Ricky's father Monroe. He grew up in Chicago's Irish south side and bars were a central part of his life.

MONROE HIGGINS

Our parents went to the tavern as soon as they got off work. That's something I inspired to. I couldn't wait to get to a bar stool. You know, I loved the bar scene. Drink beer to relax.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] The bar scene he loved became his downfall.

MONROE HIGGINS

I would sit on the bar stool. Sooner or later with the dregs of humanity and -- and you are one.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] This is Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant, an inner city neighborhood where alcohol and drugs are everywhere. It was Curtis Burke world growing up and he thinks it played a major role in his alcoholism.

CURTIS BURKE

It was always cans of half-filled cans of beer and we used to drink from them, four or five or six-years old. So you do what is acceptable in your environment and what was acceptable in my environment was to drink.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Curtis turned his life around. Today he and his fiancée run a home for mothers with alcohol and drug problems outside Atlanta.

CURTIS BURKE

I'm in this to help save the children. I believe that I have a strong connection because of what happened to me personally in my life.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

Ricky Higgins' mother Elizabeth thinks her son's destructive course was the product of biology but she knows his environment played a part as well.

ELIZABETH STERNS

The predisposition is there. Then you throw in the environment and you throw in the opportunity and what happens, happens.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Nowhere is the pressure to drink more intense than among teens. Drinking and getting drunk are often viewed as rites of passage. We all know that high school and college students drink. And we know that some of them die. Without information, alcohol can be dangerous.

ALAN MARLATT

A lot of young people, they go through this period of a few years where they really are at high risk if they are drinking, especially if they drink a lot. They could get killed and alcohol-related injuries are the leading cause of death in that age range.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] But most heavy high school and college drinkers do not become alcoholics. For many drinking is a phase, not a lifelong problem. Many experts think adolescents should have options other than abstinence programs when they first get into trouble.

FRED GLASER

One of the things that turns youngsters off is confronting them with the notion that they have to abstain for the rest of their lives.

ALAN MARLATT

Now what's hard for people to sometimes accept is, that you could think of drinking as a skilled behavior.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] Dr. Marlatt has shown that students who learn about the affects of alcohol and how to assess their own risk factors drink less. However, these students are all over 21 and we need to reach them sooner. But...

ALAN MARLATT

We have this zero tolerance policy. So if you are under 21 the law says we will not give you this information. Because if we give it to you, that will somehow give you permission to drink.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO] More than half of teenagers drink, illegal or not. Wouldn't it be better to talk to them about drinking responsibly before they get hurt or hurt someone else? The experts say that's not encouraging kids to drink, it's not enabling. It's saving lives. We cannot pretend that teenage drinking doesn't happen or treat the problem casually. Just ask Ricky Higgins.

RICKY HIGGINS

People think that it's just, 'That's what teenagers do. You know, that's what college kids do.' Well, why? Doesn't it seem like it needs to be addressed?

NANCY SNYDERMAN

Richard Banton says he tried to address those drinking problems with the teenagers he worked with. But the day after our interview he was fired. He says over philosophical differences. He is moving somewhere else where he hopes he can offer kids options to the 12-step disease model he thinks hurts them.

RICHARD BANTON

People can change behaviors. People do. I have. And that's an empowering message.

NANCY SNYDERMAN

[VO]: The urgent message of all our experts, early intervention and choices in treatment.

MARC KERN

We're keeping, I believe, millions of people out there drinking until they really do hit bottom. You don't have to have DT's to have problems with alcohol and you don't have to have your life fall apart before you start doing something about it.

2ND WOMAN

Even these days, when everyone thinks they know all about alcoholism, it still hides. No one imagines that their own drinking is a problem. No one guesses that young people, people whose faces aren't red, whose bodies aren't bloated, who don't stumble or slur, might still be controlled by their drinking. Alcoholism is still invisible, even now. [Commercial break]

NANCY SNYDERMAN

Alcoholism is devastating for those who suffer from it, those who live with it and to our society. It's clear now that current treatment methods benefit only a small number of those who desperately need help. It's time to begin a dialogue about other options, new roads to recovery. We hope we've taken a step in that direction tonight. If you think you or someone you know might be having a problem with alcohol, you can visit our Web site at 20/20.abcnews.com to find out more and chat with me and experts from 12 steps and alternative programs tonight at midnight Eastern time...

TEXT:

DRINKING: ARE YOU IN CONTROL? Chat Live with Dr. Nancy Snyderman Tonight Midnight E/T

NANCY SNYDERMAN

...and don't forget to watch "20/20 Friday" at 10, 9 Central time. I'm Dr. Nancy Snyderman. For all of us at ABC News, good night.

[END OF TAPE]