

Niku Tabatabai

Mr. Speice

Independent Study and Mentorship- 3A

15 September 2017

Internists and Alcoholism: The Intermingled Relationship

Research Assessment #3

Date: 15 September 2017

Subject: Alcoholism

MLA Citation:

O'Connor, Patrick G. "The general internist." *Alcohol Health & Research World*, Spring 1994, p. 110+. *Academic OneFile*, go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&u=j043905010&v=2.1&id=GALE%7CA16056337&it=r&asid=211ad48c975b984d401108adf2c3801e. Accessed 15 Sept. 2017.

Assessment:

Physicians often rely heavily on medical tests and procedures in order to confirm their diagnosis. Being certain about lab results and different tests gives the physician and patient a great sense of security. However, one topic that does not allow internal medicine physicians to be certain of their diagnosis is alcoholism.

Alcoholism may not be accepted by everyone, but this disease is, in fact, the most widely recognized by internists. This condition is not one to make itself well known through symptoms. Alcoholics appear to be asymptomatic, which is why many internists who are not experienced tend to stray away from such a diagnosis. Many cases of alcoholism go undiagnosed due to the

lack of training that internists have received. However, it has been documented that nearly 42 percent of male patients and 35 percent of female patients are struggling with this condition. There is a lack of training for internal medicine physicians to be able to accurately screen, diagnose, and treat alcoholics, which I find to be quite surprising because even the smallest amount of training could help completely change an individual's life. With this said, those internists who have been properly trained are well aware that taking a comprehensive family history is the very first step that must be completed in any evaluation. Those patients who have a family history of substance abuse are put at a much higher risk of eventually developing substance abuse problems as well. It is clear that training is absolutely required for this process because of the sensitivity of the issue. Internists must learn how to approach the topic sensitively, for topics related to family may result in great anger and push-back from the patients. Being able to handle an emotionally heightened situation is, therefore, a characteristic that future internists and hospitalists must already have or must quickly learn. This characteristic is not necessarily one that all future physicians are aware of and is something that I should keep in mind once conducting my interviews and mentor visits. Also, many internists may want to avoid a misdiagnosis and opt out of addressing a situation with a patient of theirs for that very reason. Overall, when it comes to my mentor visits and interviews, observing how a physician interacts with patients and handles difficult situations could possibly be an indicator of his or her education and training.

Another tell tale sign of alcoholism is the recognition of several symptoms that could have been caused by long term substance abuse. These symptoms include gastrointestinal disease, neurological disease, social complications, and much more. It is shocking to me to find

how a condition that is so difficult to truly diagnosis can have such a negative impact on every aspect of a person's health. Therefore, I have now realized a major problem within the field of internal medicine and have come to the conclusion that more training must be offered to internists. This is the only way to prepare them for diagnosing and treating alcoholics in the correct manner. A CAGE test is quite an effective screening method that is used by internists and hospitalists, but not everyone is aware of it. This screening process includes questions such as whether or not the patient has ever cut down on drinking. The sensitivity of these questions further support my point that not every physician is equipped to handle the social aspect of this job, for it may turn violent from denial very quickly. I find this new information to be extremely useful to my ISM journey because it provides me with a platform to possibly base my original work or even my final product on. The importance of the availability of further training could mean life or death for some patients, which is a signal to act fast.

Many individuals see the treatment of alcoholism being completely in the hands of therapists and the Alcoholics Anonymous program. However, internal medicine physicians have an essential role in the treatment and recovery process, especially if they were the one to diagnose it. I have realized that internists must take time and learn about their community extensively, for they should be able to recommend some programs for those who suffer from moderate to severe alcoholism. However, some patients may not utilize these programs and depend solely on their doctor. Internists and hospitalists may call in family members in some situations and host office interventions, which many patients have found to be extremely helpful. No matter which direction an alcoholic chooses to go in terms of treatment, it is the responsibility of the internist to always be there to give factual and non judgemental advice, as

well as unconditional support. The ability of internal medicine physicians to do such things, once again, largely depends on their amount of specific training. I was previously aware that internists are large problem solvers, but the extent of their abilities and responsibilities was not apparent to me until now. They were not apparent until I learned the great skill required to accurately diagnosis alcoholism.

I found this topic to be one of great importance and necessity. Internists have the ability to save the lives of those who are slowly killing themselves. They could potentially educate and help many turn their lives around for the better. However, this is often hindered due to the lack of training given to internists regarding these situations. This lack of education could often lead to misdiagnosis or a complete lack of care and empathy from the physician. My ISM journey, from day one, has been to find the significant and integral parts of internal medicine, and I have discovered that alcoholism is one of them. Whether or not I use my outrage at the lack of training given to many internists for my original work or final product, I am certain that in the next couple of weeks I will continue to discover important topics that are often neglected due to lack of training. Situations that can be prevented, such as this one, truly take a toll on me because these are people's lives at stake, which is why I would like to play a part in positively changing the way training is conducted.