

Special article

Does America spend enough on addiction treatment? Results from public opinion surveys

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Abstract

Addiction treatment is often misunderstood and underappreciated in the United States. Although a large body of literature clearly demonstrates the clinical and economic benefits of addiction treatment for many clients and in most settings, the general public has a somewhat ambivalent attitude toward treatment expansion and taxpayer financing. A potential reason for this disconnect between economic evidence and public opinion is a weak identification with the need for, or the success of, addiction treatment for those individuals without a substance abuse problem themselves or in members of their family. Alternatively, addiction treatment stakeholders may be delivering an ineffective or misdirected message about the social value of this industry. This article explores these and other potential explanations for the paradoxically low placement of the addiction treatment industry among other socially important institutions in the United States. Although none of the explanations advanced in this article has been scientifically tested or verified, it is hoped that the historical inquiry and information provided herein will offer practical strategies for the stability and growth of the addiction treatment industry. © 2006 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Addiction to alcohol and other drugs is a widespread problem in the United States. Data from the most recent National Household Survey on Drug Abuse indicate that 22.5 million people in the United States have been diagnosed with substance abuse/dependence (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2005a). A large proportion of households in the country are therefore directly or indirectly impacted by alcohol and drug addiction, regardless of gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or region of residence.

Increasing evidence indicates that substance abuse treatment can result in positive clinical outcomes and economic benefits (Marwick, 1998). It is somewhat surprising, therefore, that the addiction treatment industry is experiencing declining reimbursement rates from public and private insurance companies, deteriorating working conditions and wages among treatment personnel, and increasing community ambivalence—or even opposition—to the placement of addiction treatment facilities in certain neighborhoods (Mark & Coffey, 2004; McLellan, Carise, & Kleber, 2003).

One possible explanation for the shortage of tangible (i.e., financial and legislative) support for addiction programs despite encouraging economic evidence relates to the deep division among politicians and the public on whether substance abuse/dependence is a medical condition. Advocates of the medical model of substance abuse believe that addiction treatment is the most appropriate and effective health care intervention for this chronic health condition.

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