

History of Narcotics Anonymous - Australia

Narcotics Anonymous in Australia The Beginnings

by Melvyn B.

Toorak Group of Narcotics Anonymous

1995

1974

My recovery started when I got to Alcoholics Anonymous in 1974, and stopped drinking and using sleeping pills. I had already stopped the hashish back in 1969, in Spain, and the Stelazine round about 1972. There was no Narcotics Anonymous, but back in 1974 and 1975 talking about my drug use at A.A. meetings was never a problem. I knew instinctively that for me, sobriety meant not using any kind of mood altering drug.

There were not many of us in A.A. then who had used drugs as well as alcohol, and because we were so few we could talk about it without anybody hassling us. So at meetings I heard a few others talk who were also recovering from drug addiction.

I was one of the very few who had used illegal drugs who was just going to ordinary A.A. meetings. Most other addicts that I met who had used illegal drugs went to the Young Peoples Group in South Yarra. I hadn't used illegal drugs in Australia, only in Singapore, South Viet- Nam and Spain. But that didn't matter, I still identified with them.

1975

In Alcoholics Anonymous I came across a little black pocket book called "24 Hours a Day" and I wondered if the publisher - Hazelden - had any other material

on alcoholism, drug addiction and recovery. I wrote to them and got back this wonderful catalogue full of books and audio tapes on recovery.

I didn't have any money to send them, but I figured it would do no harm to send in an order anyhow, and if they opened an account for me and sent the resources, then great. If they didn't, nothing had been lost.

Lo and behold, around November 1975 this big box arrived for me from the United States, and inside was a treasure trove of recovery. Included in the material I had ordered, and Hazelden had sent, was the White Book of Narcotics Anonymous. I remember looking at all these pamphlets, books and tapes laid out on the dining room table, and thinking that soon I would know all that was in them, and how wonderful that would be.

I soon found out that knowledge is just that - only knowledge. It did not mean some kind of automatic behaviour change. I like the idea that wisdom is the action of putting knowledge into practice. I found out that gaining knowledge was easy, it was putting what I knew into my daily life that was so difficult.

It was just two months earlier that something caught up with me that was going to change my life. On the 20th September 1975 I started to cough up blood mixed with horrible looking green phlegm. That night I did two things, I stopped smoking and I looked up the symptoms of tuberculosis.

I figured that stopping smoking was too hard for me, but as it took at least 5 seconds for me to roll a cigarette, I knew that I could put off having a smoke for 5 seconds. So that is what I did, I translated the saying one day at a time to 5 seconds at a time, confident that I could last that 5 seconds, over and over again. It took many months of doing this, as well as feeling crazy and alienated, before I admitted to anyone, including myself, that I had stopped smoking. I always carried the makings with me.

After months of coughing up blood and phlegm, and getting progressively more tired and depressed, the medical profession could still find nothing wrong with me. I used to get up in the morning, go to work, sleep at work, go home, sleep at home, go to a meeting, just stay awake at the meeting, and then go to bed for my normal sleep.

I was very tired, depressed, and very sick, but none of this interfered with me staying clean, or with going to 4 or 5 meetings a week. I kept my recovery very simple. But my sickness and my lifestyle certainly did not help my marriage. At my suggestion my wife started going to Al-Anon, and later on she started the Tuesday Al-Anon group at Ferntree Gully.

1976

The local doctor had told me to take Valium for my depression, which I had refused to do. He knew I was an addict. Six months after initially coughing up blood he at last let me know that I had tuberculosis. He phoned me up at work and told me to come and see him straight away, but on no account was I to enter the surgery, or get near anybody else. When I got there he shouted his instructions to me from a goodly distance, and I went into Heatherton Hospital the following day feeling like a leper.

Although at some level I thought the hospital would fix me up, it is a funny feeling knowing that there is something inside of you that is eating away your lungs, and that you are in the process of dying. Nevertheless, using was not an option. What I found was that every second took on more meaning, the colours looked brighter, and the birds singing sounded more wonderful. Unfortunately this clarity did not last.

In those days Heatherton Hospital was for tuberculosis patients on one side of the hospital, and alcoholics and drug addicts on the other side. However, I soon found out that just about every TB patient was also alcoholic or drug dependent.

At that time the reservoir of TB infection in Australia was in alcoholics and addicts, who were too debilitated to resist the infection. It is probable that I got infected in Laos, Cambodia or South Viet-Nam, and that my drinking and drug use, and not eating, had finished off my body's defenses.

I was 16 months clean when I went into Heatherston Hospital, to be surrounded by men who were all using pills, drinking booze, or smoking dope. At both ends of the ward corridor was a bathroom/toilet, and this was used as the local pub. There was nothing I could do, I was isolated, and could not go to meetings.

This was when I learnt that it was my attitude to my recovery - what I needed to do about myself - that mattered most. If my staying clean had depended on my getting to meetings then I would have used, probably the treatment would have failed, and I would have died of TB, booze and drugs. Fortunately I had a sponsor who had talked about the certainty of sobriety, dependent upon working the steps. And work the steps I had certainly done.

On my intake I had made it clear I was a recovering alcoholic and addict and would not take any mood altering drugs. Possibly due to this, or because I expressed interest, I was invited to attend group sessions on the alcoholism and drug addiction ward when I was allowed to move around.

The first session had the psychiatrist teaching us all how to drink socially, and the second had the social worker telling us all about her latest blackouts, and how normal these were. I figured that these sessions were not for me - they probably should not have been for anybody else either. But this was where government treatment was in those days.

After they could no longer find any signs of active tuberculosis I came out of isolation and was allowed out of the hospital during the day to do whatever I wanted to do.

By this time my wife had left me, and didn't want to see me. I figured that she found it so good to be without me whilst I was in hospital that she decided to make it permanent. In no way do I blame her. I closed down as far as my feelings towards her were concerned, and I did not allow myself to get in touch with those feelings for many years.

The marriage had got me to recovery, which I needed; and it had got her a career and a meaning to life; which she needed. However painful parts of that marriage had been, I believe we had both benefited from it. I might even have saved our lives.

To this day I do not know where the thought came from, but I decided I wanted to become an alcoholism and drug addiction counsellor. Maybe I thought that being a counsellor was some kind of short cut to recovery. If I did I certainly found out how wrong I was in the years that followed. I also found out how screwed up most counsellors were, no matter how together they presented themselves to the world.

I had been impressed by a woman in Al-Anon called Lisa, whom I knew was a volunteer counsellor with the Victorian Foundation on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, so I contacted them. This is the counselling service now known as Addcare. Then it was run by the Reverend Allan Appleby, and he interviewed me and accepted me for training.

The training was in two parts - the counselling training was one part and learning about alcoholism and drug addiction the other. Part of the learning about alcoholism and drug addiction was to spend some time, usually half a day or a day, with every person or agency or hospital in Melbourne that dealt with alcoholics or drug addicts.

This involved a lot of organising and a lot of time, but because I was still in hospital I was able to do it. Bouyancy was in Carlton (and the addicts I met there

reminded me of the writings of William Burroughs), blockade was the rage, and Narcotics Anonymous did not exist. Alcoholism was a dirty word and drug addiction was even worse. That is how it was in 1976.

I learned a tremendous amount by visiting all the people, agencies and hospitals. I found a little bit of wisdom, a lot of ignorance, some compassion and a fair amount of arrogance. There were just so many people supposedly helping alcoholics and addicts who did not have a clue about what they were doing. One thing I learned for sure, if you were an addict in 1976, and wanted to get clean, there was virtually nothing of value for you. If you were the parent, partner or friend of an addict, there was virtually nothing available to help you either.

This was my reading of the situation in Melbourne after I had spent time at all these places. There was counselling available, but I understood from what I knew, and didn't know, and couldn't do; that counselling simply was not enough, there had to be more. What had worked for me was being a part of a 12 step fellowship. With me that had been Alcoholics Anonymous. That was alright for me, I could identify as an alcoholic as well as an addict, but what about those who could only identify as an addict.

So as a counsellor I was supposed to be able to help addicts to get clean, and stay clean. And I knew I could not do that. I knew that more than counselling was needed, and I had no faith whatsoever in the rehabilitation places that were around at that time. So I decided to do what I could to change this.

Amongst all the material that I had got from Hazelden were two pamphlets that gave me a direction to go in. The first one was the White Book of Narcotics Anonymous, and the other was the Guide for the Family of the Drug Abuser, which had been published by Families Anonymous.

I wrote away to both these Fellowships and from Narcotics Anonymous I got a reply from Jimmy Kinnon, the founder of Narcotics Anonymous, encouraging me

to start Narcotics Anonymous in Australia, and he enclosed all the current literature and a starter kit for new groups.

I later got an audiotape from Jimmy in which he talked about the difficulties in starting a fellowship, mentioning the Bleeding Deacons that caused problems for the Fellowship in the United States. He figured that we would get them in Australia too. He was right, but fortunately they did not come along until a few years after we had got going, and by then the Fellowship was strong enough to put up with them.

I never met Jimmy Kinnon, but I did meet his wife Betty at an N.A. convention in Las Vegas in 1990, and she shared with me how about how much effort, time and money Jimmy had put into carrying the message to all who were interested, both in the United States and other countries such as Australia.

When I finally got out of hospital I did two things. I arranged with Allan Appleby to start Families Anonymous with the clients of Addcare, which we did. And I went out to meetings of A.A. where I might meet addicts, and put to them about starting a group of Narcotics Anonymous.

I met up with Matthew, a New Zealander, who also knew of other addicts, and I contacted Elva from Dandenong, who always talked about her drug use at A.A. meetings. Elva became the first woman member of Narcotics Anonymous in Australia.

Jimmy Kinnon had given us a contact in Sydney, and Matthew and I followed this up, meeting with Patsy and David in Frankston, and later on with someone called Jimmy, who came down from Sydney. They were all very encouraging, but that was all. What we had to start with was the literature and ourselves. It was enough.

We had our first meeting on Saturday 21st August 1976, and there were seven of

us at that meetings - Elva, Matthew, Ross, Des, Kelvin, Kevin and myself. All of the original 7 members had got clean and sober in Alcoholics Anonymous, and all except Elva and myself were from the Young Peoples Group of Alcoholics Anonymous in South Yarra, as far as I recall.

Narcotics Anonymous and Families Anonymous started during the same week, and in the same place. Families Anonymous did not succeed at that time, but Narcotics Anonymous did take off, and has been in existence in Australia ever since. Families Anonymous was to get going later, and has encouraged many addicts to seek recovery in Narcotics Anonymous.

For the next 18 months we met every Saturday night at the Fawkner Park Community Health Centre in Prahran. And for the next 18 months every Saturday I drove over to Dandenong in my little Suzuki 4-wheel drive to meet Elva, and we then drove to Prahran for the Narcotics Anonymous meeting. Afterwards I would drive back to Dandenong to drop off Elva, and then head back to Tecoma, and home. The traveling, the conversation with Elva, the meeting, the talking afterwards, the drive and the time for reflection on the way home from Dandenong, were all of great benefit to me.

From the start we talked about how we were feeling, and how our recovery was going. We would talk about our drug use if we felt like it, or there were new members at the meeting. I am sure there was a limit to how often I needed to hear someone's drug story, and I am equally sure there was a limit to how often anybody else needed to hear mine. But recovery, well, that was always exciting and presenting new challenges to meet, and new accomplishments to achieve. And for me this is still true today.

Everybody in that first big group put in time and effort to the group, and to the bigger job of getting Narcotics Anonymous known to addicts that might want to join. I remember that there were about 25 people at our first anniversary at

Fawkner Park. The first contact phone number was my own phone number - 754-5944, and a box number in Belgrave near Tecoma where I lived. All our literature was stamped with this information.

1977

Bill D. was the first person to get clean and sober wholly in Narcotics Anonymous. Dutch Bill, as he was known, was an old using friend of mine, and I had been married at his place in Sherbrooke, where he had been my best man. I had previously taken him to A.A., but he had not been interested. He stayed clean from his first meeting of Narcotics Anonymous. The last I heard of Bill was that he was in Esperance, Western Australia.

Dutch Bill started the second meeting of N.A. in Bendigo, where he was living at the time, and his phone number was the second N.A. phone contact in our literature. After Dutch Bill left Bendigo the N.A. meeting there was closed, and over the years it opened and closed many times.

It was around this time that I organized our first meeting poster, with the message - If You Want to Use Drugs, that's your business; If you Want to Stop Using Drugs, That's Our's - together with the basic contact information. We put these notices up wherever we could, especially in the suburbs of St. Kilda and Fitzroy, and round the agencies.

On a more basic level of one addict helping another addict, well, there were no detoxification centre's around then, or very few. Smith Street had a quota system, it was something like they would detoxify on addict for every 12 alcoholics they detoxified, and they would not have more than one addict at a time. So if an addict needed help in withdrawing they either had to live with one of us for that withdrawal period, or one of us had to go live with them.

I don't know that anybody I did this with stayed clean for too long, but it sure helped me. I also learnt to set limits on what was reasonable for me to do, and what a withdrawing addict needed to do for himself or herself. There were a lot of problems with this method, especially from suspicious, and often still using, partners.

Another problem I encountered was dealing with seductive stoned female addicts, who figured that bedding me would either help their recovery, or give them company in using. I have never pretended to be a saint in sexual matters, but this I never went along with. And I learned that whoever said that hell hath no fury like a woman scorned knew what they were talking about.

The thirteenth step is one we should always, as individuals and as a Fellowship, do everything necessary to prevent. There are other programs now available to help those who have lost control in the love and sex area.

Another problem was being phoned up by addicts who had overdosed. Sometimes I got an ambulance to them, and sometimes I picked them up myself, often collapsed outside a public telephone, and took them home. Fortunately no one died on me, but I know today that I needed to be there for the addict who wanted to recover, not for the addict who just wanted me to rescue them from a bad trip.

I sometimes wonder where those addicts are today. I hope they are living the life they would want for themselves.

About halfway through 1977 Matthew left for England, and I have not seen him since. I hope that one day we will meet up again. Matthew was N.A.'s first group secretary, I believe Elva took over from him. Winnie, the first woman I ever sponsored, was the last secretary, and then she moved to Tasmania.

Now that we had two meetings going we really thought we had something to tell the world. So we thought big, and created Narcotics Anonymous Victoria, which we thought sounded pretty good. So I became the secretary of N.A. Victoria, responsible for carrying the message at the State level, although in fact, that was what I had always done, only now I had a fancy title.

Our problem was to get all those in the treatment area to take us seriously, and to refer suffering addicts to us. The professional prejudice against non-professionals in general and Twelve Step Fellowships in particular was immense. Nevertheless, we tried to carry the message of recovery in Narcotics Anonymous to everybody who came into contact with addicts. And slowly more addicts came through the doors to check us out.

1978

The next meeting in Melbourne was started by Kelvin at the Carlton Community Centre. It was upstairs in a dingy room with very little in the way of facilities. But I do remember some gutsy sharing that went on at that group, when we talked about our current problems with relationships, sex, money and food.

Some months into 1978 the original group closed down. Things had changed, peoples lives had moved on, and the meeting was no longer viable. It closed down shortly after the meeting in Carlton started, and then later on the meeting at the Wesley Mission started.

The first meeting at the Wesley Mission was in a little room in what used to be St. Mary's Home for Young Ladies from the Country. This building in the Wesley Central Mission Complex has now been pulled down.

1979

In 1979 the meeting moved to the present building, in fact to the Boardroom, where we used to meet round this huge table, which was very useful in keeping separate those of us that were having violent arguments - not uncommon in those days. Des, and especially Ross, were committed to this group, and kept it going through thick and thin. I used to get there every Friday night, and meet up with my partner Christine, and her son Jeremy.

Although Christine and I separated many years ago, I still see Jeremy, and have invited him to some meetings. He has been, but tells me he needs to recover from all those enforced meetings of N.A. when he was around 10 years old.

During this same year I started the Belgrave Group of Narcotics Anonymous, which continued, more or less, until the mid 1980's. It was a discussion group, the first in N.A. We had one guy who used to talk for about half an hour about how wonderful he was with women, so I introduced an egg timer to limit all speakers to 5 minutes. It worked well; he stopped coming so we were able to throw away the egg timer and get back to talking about recovery. I was the first secretary, then Christine took it over, and later on, in the early 1980's, Rod became the secretary.

This was the year that substantial progress on the basic text was made. I was sent the original draft of the first part of what was to become the basic text, this was in a shiny white cover, and I got permission from N.A. World Service Office to copy this book and distribute it as far as possible. Then later on came a small grey book in which were written personal stories.

As groups throughout the world were invited to comment upon the recovery text and the personal stories, and to put forward their own suggestions for the forthcoming book. The members were also asked to forward their own personal stories for possible inclusion in the book.

I wrote a short story on how N.A. got started in Melbourne, and sent this off to the United States. At about the same time Ross got together with some members at his place to write their stories, which were also sent off to the United States.

During this year I started an 11th Step Meditation group for those of us who wanted to practice meditation with the support of other recovering alcoholics and addicts. We started off in a Buddhist Meditation Centre, just off Greville Street, Prahran, and later moved to Fawkner Park Community Health Centre, where N.A. had started 3 years previously.

We found that those of us who had done the 5th step could hack the hard work of trying to allow the mind to become still. The group lasted for 18 months, and was attended by both N.A. and A.A. members. I believe it was the only meeting of its kind in the world.

I finally closed when I could find no one else to lead the meeting. I know that Ross could never understand how a person who has no belief in any kind of god, such as myself, could take part in 11th step meditation practices. I learned that spiritual growth and getting in touch with our inner selves does not have to be part of a belief in some kind of god or higher power.

1980

In the United States N.A. members all over the country were going through the suggestions for the The Book, and putting it all together. The next step was to have the text and the personal stories together in one book. This was done and the Big Grey Book was printed and sent out all over the world for comment. My short story about how Narcotics Anonymous got going in Melbourne was in this book.

The World Service Office in Sun Valley, California sent me about 15 copies for Australia. I spent a lot of time telephoning all over Australia chasing up anyone

that might have some connection with Narcotics Anonymous. When I found a possible connection, I sent them a Big Grey Book. I eventually sent out about 12 of these books, but it was more a case of trying to do the right thing, than with any great expectation that anything would come of it.

What happened to all those books I have no idea as I got very little feedback. A few were returned with addresses not known. I passed one on to Ross, for the Wesley House group, and kept one to be looked at by my group in Belgrave, and other members that I was in contact with. The books I had left, plus all the other historical material that I had on N.A., including the first meeting book, I sent to the Victorian Area Service Committee a few years ago. I would love to know what happened to the books I sent out.

I remember that some of us once spent a whole day at Elva's going through the Big Grey Book line by line. We recorded our comments on tape and in notes, and sent this on to some guy in Marietta, Georgia, who was co-ordinating all this. If anyone thinks that there is a lot of God in the Basic Text now, they should have seen it them.

At about the same time I received a request from the United States to write a personal story for consideration for the story section of the book. What they wanted was something more personal than the story that had appeared in the Big Grey Book. So I wrote the story which now appears in the Basic Text, and tried to be as truthful and as relevant as I could be. I had then been clean for about 6 years, which was probably about average for all those who contributed to the book.

I also wrote some recovery material for the first part of the book, and this was accepted, and became integrated into the first part of the Basic Text. It always gives me a thrill to hear read out from the Basic Text words and sentences that I wrote all those years ago. I also had a thrill when I discovered that some of the

quotations from the Basic Text which appear at the top of each page in our daily reading book - Just For Today - were from what I had written at that time.

What is important for me today is to acknowledge that what we wrote for the Basic Text was the very best we could do at that time. There is much in it that is very helpful to any sick or recovering addict. But I think that we should also remember that it was written by ordinary members of Narcotics Anonymous.

The Basic Text is not wisdom from on high, it is good, basic recovery stuff, and what we don't like in it, we can choose to leave. I have learnt that everything is not for everybody, and that rigidity and intolerance are our Fellowships worst enemy. Getting rid of the belief that I am always right has been one of my hardest and longest fought battles in recovery. Maybe that is a challenge that will always be there for addicts like me.

1981

In 1981 Ross and others from the Wesley House Group organized the first Australian Narcotics Anonymous convention, which was held for a whole weekend at the back of Wesley House. I remember that two guys came down from Sydney to take part, and it was great to see them, and to know that N.A. was spreading.

In 1981 I got into a profound depression. My living-together relationship with Christine, who had joined N.A. after we met, was coming to an end. My profession of 10 years in the business of computer programming and systems analysis no longer interested me. My recovery and my life appeared to be coming to a full stop.

However, I did have a stall at local markets on a Sunday, displaying and selling literature about alcoholism and drug addiction. I didn't sell much but I did enjoy challenging the denial that was rampant in society. I will never forget how some

people would approach my stall, see what was going on, then suddenly veer away as though I was selling something deadly and infectious.

Eventually I stopped working and isolated myself in my study. The outcome of all the isolation and the depression was that I decided to go into counselling full time, and to start an alcoholism and drug dependence agency in my area. I know how bizarre all this sounds, but that is the way it was. I was studying drug issues at the State College of Victoria at Coburg at the time, this was the start of by getting official-type qualifications, all of which were basically useless from a practical point of view. I was also doing some counselling that was coming from my local area.

I got to work to establish the agency now called Addrec, and the depression left me. I put everything I had into it, even though there was virtually no money coming in until I got government funding after 6 months. I received a lot of help from Eda Ots at the Health Commission, from local people, and especially Christine. I also got a lot of condemnation from some members of N.A. and A.A. for becoming a professional. Disregarding that, for me creating something from nothing has been a great satisfaction, and to see it continuing without me means that what I did was of some lasting value.

I was soon in a position where I was referring addicts to Narcotics Anonymous, and I knew it was not appropriate for me to be at those same meetings. My clients needed to be at meetings without me being there. And if I was to go to a meeting, I needed to be able to share honestly without anything I said affecting a professional relationship.

From my point of view, the easiest solution was for me to stop going to meetings. I didn't need meetings to stay clean, I know that from my time in Heatherton Hospital, and from what I had learnt about the nature of recovery over the years. So I stopped regular attendance at meetings, both Narcotics Anonymous and A.A., and I continued with my recovery in other ways. Although over the years I

did get to some meetings every year, including N.A. in Sydney in 1983, and Belgrave N.A. until 1983.

This upset some people in N.A., and for one reason or another, continued to upset some members for many years. I have even known of members who have never met me to be upset about me. I believe that at that period of time my value to the addict, and others who were still suffering, was far greater by doing what I did, than if I had gone to meetings and not done what I did. Having said all that, my recovery and my life is my affair, and no one else's.

I guess one of the major aspects of recovery is learning that other people do not have to do what we think they should do, even if we supposedly 'know' that what we think is right. I know that what I think is right today is not necessarily what I thought was right 10, 15 or 20 years ago.

1995

I could have written just a clinical account of the start of Narcotics Anonymous here in Melbourne, but the start was not clinical, or cold. A whole variety of different things were happening to different people, whose lives then crossed, sometimes for only a short time, sometimes for years. This is what happened to me during those years, and what I did, and how I see that now.

My story of the beginnings of Narcotics Anonymous is just that, it is my story. No doubt others would tell it differently, and that is how it should be. I didn't do everything perfectly, nor did I do everything by the book, or always for commendable reasons. No doubt some of my actions were inspired by grandiosity. But, I did what I did, and the results are what they are. And I am not unhappy with the results.

I have no desire to rewrite history to fit in with what "should" be, or that would fit in the "party line" of some similar rubbish better. I do not believe that censoring

history is for open and truthful fellowships like I believe Narcotics Anonymous is. If we can't be truthful and tolerant, we die as a Fellowship; and sometimes as individuals. What I have written, as truthfully as I can, is my part in the start of Narcotics Anonymous here in Australia.

When I was in the United States in 1990 I learned how A.A. historians had concealed from the A.A. fellowship anything about the early years or about Bill W. which they did not want the fellowship to know. I think they did A.A. a disservice. We know today that recovery from just one addiction or behaviour usually means denial about other addictions or behaviours. My recovery in A.A. was a start, my recovery in N.A. was and is a continuation, and whatever else I need I will go and get it. I think that today Narcotics Anonymous is strong enough to live with its truth, no matter what that is.

Melvyn B. - Belgrave, Australia