



Glasnost and alcoholism

BY JOHN PRIN

The scene: Ten Americans and one Russian in the same room exchanging vital information and views about chemical dependency. **The place:** A conference center at the Metropolitan Clinic of Counseling in Minneapolis, 9 a.m. on a sunny summer morning. **The significance:** Such a meeting—to discuss how experienced chemical dependency counselors from the USA could aid the efforts of a fledgling counterpart from the USSR—was unimaginable five years ago.

But thanks to Mikhail Gorbachev's visit to Minnesota last year and to months of volunteer efforts since by tireless citizens on both sides of the Capitalist/Communist curtain, this meeting was made possible. **Featured guest:** Police captain Vladimir Luri from Sverolovsk in the Ural mountains, a vigorous, vocal, articulate 35-year-old pioneer of Soviet "CD" reform.

"Alcoholism is rampant in the Soviet Union today and recovery is feeble," stated Luri in English. "Aside from flashes of good counseling in Moscow and Leningrad, our only method of combating alcoholism is with police force. Our success rate is just three percent."

Captain Luri's hometown is a huge industrial city, "highly polluted and depressing." He likens the situation facing his generation to the late 1950s and early 1960s in the United States. "Our only recourse for dealing with drunkenness is to arrest the drunk person, lock him up for 24

hours, and release him. No treatment. No detox. No counseling or education."

There is a 97 percent likelihood that the same individual will be arrested and will visit the drunk tank again . . . and again, he added. Moreover, this repetitive cycle pertains only to public drunkenness, "let alone the bottles of vodka consumed in private."

Several of Luri's American listeners agreed that similarities existed in the United States prior to 1972. Until then, noted Joan Casper, anyone picked up for drunk driving was taken to jail. But slowly the situation changed, particularly in Minnesota where changes first started to occur, and arrested persons were taken to medical facilities where nurses and doctors attempted treatment, rather than to policemen and jailers who could merely hold the person in temporary custody.

Tim Rice gave Luri a brief history lesson, starting with the gradual acceptance of AA in the 1940s. Because of A.A.'s effectiveness, a rethinking of attitudes slowly took place which led to changes in public policy decades later, as evidenced by the shift in 1972 from perceiving drunkenness as a crime to viewing it as a disease. Rice indicated that a similar number of years might be necessary for attitudes to shift toward favoring treatment in the USSR.

Captain Luri lamented that Alcoholics Anonymous is hardly more than a new idea in his country, despite its universal appeal among professionals like himself who have learned about it. "The prevailing public mood is one of aggression, uncertainty, disbelief and depression. Alcohol is seen as the RX. Depression is so widespread it is hardly being treated."

Participants David Huberty, Patricia McGuire and John Buck offered assorted ideas: examples of U.S. corporations that have developed programs which pay for employees to get help, and identification of diplomatic mechanisms that could be created which allow for future visits by experts, workshops and speakers' forums, etc.

Captain Luri readily agreed. In theory he could agree with everything but at one point he shook his head, "To solve problems so big, you must have somebody who cares. And lots of money."

Quipped David Huberty, "What you've

got to find then is one good capitalist manager to cooperate with who is interested in improving productivity."

Luri laughed, along with everybody else, then asked, "Where does the money come from?"

Patricia McGuire ventured a reply. "Once people see something to profit from, once AA is established and success rates improve, then donors and volunteers will contribute." She pointed out that progress is very slow in the beginning but encouraged Captain Luri to use the vast amounts of documentation that now exist (which took decades to compile), and could be translated for his country's use.

Among others, Tim Rice encouraged creating a simple page of information that could be handed to a drunk person arrested and put into jail, "as a start toward counseling and education. You've got them for 24 hours, use it. The individual's families could also be handed the same pamphlet and told what steps to take to help them."

Other suggestions surfaced:

- o Explore avenues of community support such as free space for meetings provided by churches, synagogues and mosques.
- o Exchange printed materials—articles, lectures, pamphlets.
- o Encourage U.S. corporations getting established in the USSR to contribute funds and to replicate existing employee treatment programs.
- o Formulate ways to increase cross cultural visits.

With these and several other ideas Captain Luri emphatically agreed. But in a polite manner he shrugged his shoulders, smiled and replied that, while he and a few other officials willingly and eagerly look forward to decisive reforms, "Our government prohibits the legal sale of alcohol except in very limited quantities. This policy has led to a huge black market, as you yourselves experienced 50 years ago. Come to my city and you will see long lines of shoppers waiting to buy a bottle of vodka, but no lines of people standing in line for treatment." *