

# Making Treatment Count: Client-Directed, Outcome-Informed Clinical Work with Problem Drinkers

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A client-directed, outcome-informed approach is presented that documents how this way of thinking about, and working with, problem drinkers facilitates better client engagement and improves treatment outcomes. As is true of the field of therapy, the history of drug and alcohol treatment has been marked by contention and debate. Popular assumptions and models since proven to be flawed include: the 'disease' model; that the problem ran in families; the need for expensive hospital-based detoxification; and that people can recover, but can never be cured. The authors highlight the movement of the field away from diagnosis and program-driven treatment towards 'individualised assessment-driven treatment'. Research has made clear that, regardless of type or intensity of approach, client engagement is the single best predictor of outcome. A format, designed by the American Society of Addiction Medicine, for an individualized service plan based on multidimensional assessment criteria is presented, in addition to a detailed discussion of how to implement an outcome-informed, client-directed method of feedback within a treatment service.

*The misuse of alcohol is a serious and widespread problem. Whether or not clinicians are interested, available evidence indicates they will encounter it on a regular basis throughout their careers. Indeed, the prevalence of abuse and impact on the drinker, significant others, and society makes avoiding the problem impossible in any clinical, health or medical setting.*

The latest research indicates that an estimated 22 million Americans suffered from substance dependence or abuse due to drugs, alcohol or both (National Survey on Drug Use and Health [SAMHSA], 2002). Data from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) further shows that problem drinking in the USA is associated with more than 100,000 deaths per year—the statistical equivalent of a plane crash killing 274 people every single day—and the costs to society are an estimated \$185 billion (Tenth Special Report to Congress on Alcohol and Health, 2000).

The consequences of problem drinking on the family are well established. In the January 2000 issue of the *American Journal of Public Health*, researchers found that 25% of all U.S.

children are exposed to alcohol abuse and/or dependence in the family (Grant, 2000). This dry recitation of statistics takes on a sense of urgency when the problematic use of alcohol in the home is linked with poorer school performance, increased risk of delinquency, child neglect, divorce, homelessness, and violence. Available evidence indicates that as many as 80% of incidents of familial violence are associated with alcohol abuse (Collins & Messerschmidt, 1993; Eighth Special Report to the U.S. Congress on Alcohol and Health, 1993).

Sadly, many people who want or could benefit from professional intervention do not get the services they need or desire. Of the 362,000 people who recognized and sought help for a drug abuse problem in the year 2002, nearly a quarter (88,000) were unable

to obtain treatment. That same year, 266,000 problem drinkers were turned away (National Survey on Drug Use and Health [SAMHSA], 2002). As is true of any large social issue, the reasons for the failure to provide services to those in need are many, including poor funding of treatment programs, lingering social stigma associated with problem drinking, lack of professional knowledge and skills, and confusing and often contradictory information about the components of effective care.

Whatever the cause of the disconnect, research leaves little doubt about the overall effectiveness of therapy once it is obtained. Regardless of the type of treatment, the measures of success included, the duration of the study or follow up period, study after study, and study of studies, document

improvements in physical, mental, family, and social functioning, as well as decreased problematic use of alcohol or drugs following intervention (Hubbard, Craddock, Flynn, Anderson, & Etheridge, 1997), Institute of Medicine,

acknowledged flaws, in the early studies. These latter researchers noted that the majority of people with alcoholic parentage do not go on to abuse alcohol, thus calling any simple view of genetic transmission into serious question

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1990; Project MATCH, 1997; Stanton & Shadish, 1997). The same research documents the impact of services on stability of housing and employment in addition to decreased involvement with the criminal justice system.

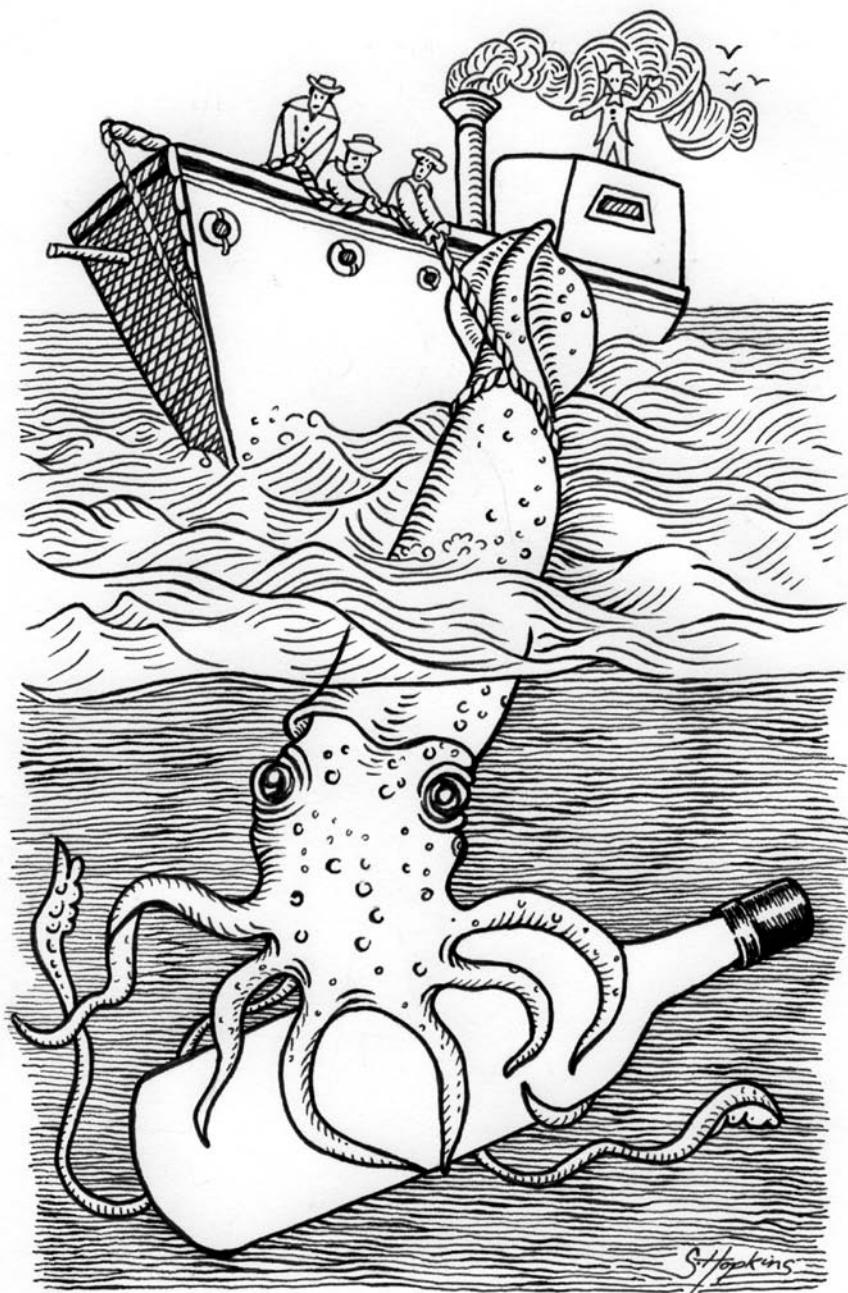
The extent of the problem and general efficacy of treatment provides astute clinicians with an opportunity to partner with problem drinkers, their families and significant others to arrest the damage and chart a course toward a more rewarding and productive life. In sections that follow, the elements of a client-directed, outcome-informed approach is presented with an emphasis on documenting how this way of thinking about, and working with, problem drinkers facilitates better client engagement and improved treatment outcomes.

### Roots of the Approach

*Do not become the slave of your model.*  
Vincent van Gogh

As is true of the field of therapy, the history of drug and alcohol treatment has been marked by contention and debate. In 1956, for example, the American Medical Association declared the misuse of alcohol 'a disease' that requires careful examination and detoxification by a physician. Controversy soon followed. Supporters of the 'disease model' of alcoholism cited research showing a progressive loss of control characteristic of an underlying pathophysiological process (c.f., Jellinek, 1960) or pointed to studies indicating that the problem '*ran in families*' (c.f., Goodwin, Schulsinger, Hermansen, Guze, & Winokur, 1973). Dissenters, in turn, were quick to cite numerous, and what are now widely

view among clinicians and the public has been that people can recover from alcoholism, but never be cured. For many years, the 'right' treatment involved a hospital-based detoxification, followed by a stay in a 28-day residential facility, lifelong commitment to total abstinence from alcohol, and ongoing participation in some form of mutual help group (e.g., Alcoholic's Anonymous, Rational Recovery, etc.). Meanwhile, a smaller group of researchers, academics, and clinicians published data critical of virtually every aspect of the dominant perspective. Research consistently failed to provide any evidence of superior outcomes for traditional long-term (and, therefore, expensive) treatment



over brief, targeted intervention or even a single session of advice giving with a family physician (Bein, Miller, & Tonigan, 1993; Miller, & Hester, 1986; Orford & Edwards, 1977). Where 'detox' was once thought an essential first step toward sobriety, subsequent research has found that the practice actually increased the likelihood of future episodes of medically supervised withdrawal that, in turn, enhanced the risk of impaired neuro-cognitive functioning (Duka, Townshend, Collier, Stephens, 2003; Miller & Hester, 1986).

Over the last 15 years, professional discourse and practice has evolved with a gradual but steady movement away from diagnosis and program-driven treatment, toward what Mee-Lee (2001) terms, '*individualized, assessment-driven treatment.*' Rather than trying to fit people into treatments based on their diagnosis, this perspective attempts to fit services to the individual based on an ongoing assessment of that person's needs and level of functioning.

Matching treatments to clients has a considerable amount of common sense appeal and, at first blush, research support. Virtually all of the literature shows that clients vary significantly in their response to different approaches (Duncan, Miller, & Sparks, 2004). The question is whether the variables assessed by clinicians lead to treatment matches that reliably improve outcome?

Enter Project MATCH, the '*largest and most statistically powerful clinical trial*' in the history of the field of alcohol and drug treatment (Project MATCH Research Group, 1997). Briefly, this NIAAA organized study assessed the impact of matching people to one of three possible treatment approaches based on 21 carefully chosen variables, including severity of alcohol involvement, cognitive impairment, psychiatric severity, conceptual level, gender, meaning-seeking, motivational readiness to change, social support for drinking versus abstinence, sociopathy, and typology of alcoholism. The results were less than encouraging. Out of 64 possible interactions tested, only one match proved significant. Moreover, while participants in the study showed considerable and sustained improvement overall, no differences in outcome were found between the three competing

approaches. The same results were observed in a follow up study conducted 10 years after the formal initiation of Project MATCH. As researchers Tonigan, Miller, Chavez, Porter, Worth, Westfall, Carroll, Repa, Martin, & Tracey (2003) conclude, '*No support for differential treatment response was found using PDA (percent days abstinent), DDD (drinks per drinking day), and total standard drink measures in comparing CBT (cognitive behavioral), MET (motivational enhancement), and TSF (twelve step facilitation) therapies 10-years after treatment*' (p. 1).

As unexpected as the results were to researchers and clinicians, they are consistent with findings from the field

*established by 40-plus years of research.'* (p. 361)

High on the list of factors mediating the link between participation and outcome is the quality of the therapeutic relationship, and in particular, the consumer's experience early in treatment (Bachelor & Horvath, 1999; Luborsky, Barber, Siqueland, Woody, McLellan, 1997; Orlinsky et al. 1994). In fact, meta-analytic studies indicate '*a little over half of the beneficial effects of psychotherapy... are linked to the quality of the alliance'* (Horvath, 2001, p. 366). Similar findings are reported in the alcohol treatment literature, where between 50-66% of the variance in outcome is attributable to qualities of the alliance between client

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of psychotherapy. As Wampold (2001) concludes in his review of the data, '*decades of research*' conducted by different researchers, using different methods, on a variety of treatment populations, provides clear evidence that '*the type of treatment is irrelevant, and adherence to a protocol is misguided*' (p. 202). Simply put, the method does not matter. Indeed, available evidence indicates that the particular approach employed accounts for 1% or less of the variance in treatment outcome (Wampold, Mondin, Moody, Stich, Benson, & Ahn, 1997).

The same body of evidence provides important clues about the predictors of successful intervention (Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 1999). Research makes clear that, regardless of type or intensity of approach, client engagement is the single best predictor of outcome. Orlinsky, Grawe, & Parks (1994) conclude:

*'The quality of the patient's (sic) participation stands out as the most important determinant of outcome...these consistent process-process outcome relations, based on literally hundreds of empirical findings, can be considered facts*

and therapist (Miller, Wilbourne, & Hettema, 2003). Framed another way, the therapeutic relationship contributes 5 to 10 times more to outcome than the particular model or approach employed (Bachelor & Horvath, 1999; Duncan, Miller, & Sparks, 2004; Wampold, 2001). A post hoc analysis of the Project MATCH data found that, unlike the treatment approach employed, the therapeutic relationship was a significant predictor of treatment participation, drinking behavior during treatment, and drinking at 12-month follow up (Connors, Carroll, DiClemente, Longabaugh, & Donovan, 1997).

Another significant predictor of outcome is the client's subjective experience of improvement early in the treatment process (Duncan, Miller, & Sparks, 2004). In one study of more than 2,000 therapists and thousands of clients, Brown, Dreis, & Nace (1999) found that treatments in which no improvement occurred by the third visit did not, on average, result in improvement over the entire course of therapy. This study further showed that clients who worsened by the third visit were twice as likely to drop out as those reporting

progress. More telling, variables such as diagnosis, severity, family support, and type of therapy were, 'not . . . as important [in predicting eventual outcome] as knowing whether or not the treatment being provided [was] actually working' (p. 404). Similar results were found in Project Match, where all of the change in the outpatient arm of the study occurred within the first four weeks (Stout, Del Boca, Carbonari, Rychtarik, Litt, & Cooney, 2003).

In recent years, researchers have used data generated during treatment with regard to the alliance and improvement to enhance the quality and outcome of care (Howard, Moras, Brill, Martinovich, & Lutz, 1996; Johnson, 1995). In one representative study, clients whose therapists had access to outcome and alliance information were less likely to deteriorate, more likely to stay longer (e.g., remained engaged), and twice as likely to achieve a clinically significant change (Whipple, Lambert, Vermeersch, Smart, Nielsen, & Hawkins, 2003). Notably, these findings were obtained without any attempt to organize, systematize or otherwise control the treatment process. Neither were the therapists in this study trained in any new therapeutic modalities, treatment techniques, or diagnostic procedures. Rather, the individual clinicians were completely free to engage their individual clients in the manner they saw fit. The only constant in an otherwise diverse treatment environment was the availability of formal client feedback.

Such findings, when taken in combination with the field's continuing failure to discover and systematize therapeutic process in a manner that reliably improves success, have led us to conclude that conventional approaches to assessment, diagnosis and treatment selection are no longer viable. Moreover, a simpler path to effective, efficient, and accountable intervention exists. Instead of assuming that a therapist's *a priori* assessment of the client's needs, level of functioning, and severity of illness will lead to a match with the type and level of treatment most likely to lead to favorable results, ongoing feedback from consumers with regard to the process and outcome of care can be used to construct and guide service delivery as well as inspire innovation.

Rather than attempting to fit clients into fixed programming or manualized treatment approaches via 'evidence-based practice,' we recommend that therapists and systems of care tailor their work to individual clients through 'practice-based evidence.' On the basis of measurable improvements in outcome alone, practice-based evidence may be the most effective evidence-based practice identified to date. Indeed, as Lambert, Whipple, Hawkins, Vermeersch, Nielsen, & Smart (2003) points out, '*those advocating the use of empirically supported psychotherapies do so on the basis of much smaller treatment effects*' (p. 296).

### Specific Intervention Strategies

*Absolutely anything you want to say about alcoholics is true about some of them and not true about all of them.*

Thomas McLellan

The client-directed, outcome-informed approach contains no fixed techniques, no invariant patterns in therapeutic process, no definitive prescriptions to produce good treatment outcome, and no causal theory regarding the concerns that bring people into treatment. Because the particular method employed or type of problem being treated is not a robust predictor of outcome across clients (~1% of the variance), almost any type (e.g., dynamic, cognitive-behavioral, family-of-origin treatment, 12-step),

mode (e.g., individual, group, family sessions), or intensity (e.g., medically supervised detoxification, residential, inpatient, outpatient settings, self-help, or any combination thereof) of service delivery has the potential to be helpful. As a result, therapists may, in principle, work in whatever manner they wish, limited only by practical and ethical considerations and their creativity.

Of course, in practice, individual practitioners and the larger healthcare systems that most work within, require structure and direction in order to operate. In this regard, operationalizing client-directed, outcome-informed work in real world clinical settings involves three key procedures:

1. a highly individualized service delivery plan for each client in care;
2. formal, ongoing feedback from clients regarding the plan, process and outcome of treatment; and
3. the integration of the plan and feedback into an innovative and flexible continuum of care that is, because of points 1 and 2, maximally responsive to the individual client.

The underlying theme is to make sure that the client is an integral partner, rather than a passive or compliant recipient, of a 'treatment program.' While the procedures are not imbued with the power to insure a positive outcome, they do serve to provide therapists and systems of care with enough structure to begin treatment and avoid organizational chaos. As will be shown, the three activities also



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enable therapists to meet their ethical obligations to do no harm and be good stewards of the limited treatment resources available. A detailed discussion of each of these three steps now follows.

## Developing an Individualized Service Delivery Plan

The individualized service delivery plan is basically a written summary, or a snapshot, of the alliance between a client and therapist (or treatment system) at a given point in time. While definitions vary across researchers, most agree that an effective alliance contains three essential ingredients: shared goals; consensus on means, methods, or tasks of treatment; and an emotional bond (Bachelor & Horvath, 1999; Bordin, 1979; Horvath & Bedi, 2002). To these three, we have added a fourth; *the client's theory of change* — namely, the client's frame of reference with regard to the presenting problem, its causes, and potential remedies (Duncan, Hubble, & Miller, 1997).

A significant amount of data indicates that congruence between a person's beliefs about the causes of his or her problems and the treatment approach results in stronger therapeutic relationships, increased duration in treatment, and improved rates of success (Duncan, Miller, & Sparks, 2004; Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 1999). Consider a study conducted by Hester, Miller, Delaney, & Meyers (1990) that compares the effectiveness of a traditional alcohol treatment with a learning-based approach. Consistent with previous studies, no differences in outcome were found at the conclusion of treatment. At follow up, however, participants who prior to the formal initiation of treatment believed that problems with alcohol were caused by a disease were much more likely to be sober had they received traditional (e.g., abstinence-based) treatment. In contrast, people who believed that their problematic use of alcohol was a 'bad habit' did better in the learning-based (e.g., moderation management) treatment (Wolfe & Meyers, 1999).

The four parts of the alliance can be thought of as a three-legged stool, with each leg representing a core ingredient of the therapeutic alliance, and the client's theory of change as what holds

everything together. Goals, methods, and a bond that are congruent with the client's theory are likely to keep people comfortably seated (i.e., engaged) in treatment. Similarly, any disagreement between various components works to destabilize the relationship, either making the stool uncomfortable or toppling it completely.

When the individualized service plan is considered as a written reflection of the alliance between a client and therapist, and not the game plan for expert intervention, the document and the process leading to its creation provide a stark contrast to traditional care. Instead of being a fixed statement of how treatment will proceed given the client's diagnosis, severity of illness, level of functioning, and available programming, the plan becomes a living, dynamic document—a collaboratively-developed synopsis of the goals, type, and level of interaction the client wants from the counsellor or system of care.

In the case of family therapy, the notion of developing an individualized service plan may, at first pass, seem incongruous. Not infrequently, for example, the person believed to have an alcohol problem is not sure, or even actively denies, there is a problem. Even more challenging perhaps are those occasions where concerned families members attend the session and the 'identified' client is absent. An 'individualized' service plan is, however, not the same as a service plan for a client seen individually. The question is, *'Who is the client?'* In the latter instance, the family is presenting for services. As such, the service plan is the written summary of the alliance between the counsellor and the family members present at that visit. As is the case in individual treatment, services are aimed at fulfilling the hopes or resolving the concerns that led the family to seek assistance in the first place (e.g., *fix our loved one, get our child, parent, etc. to stop drinking*). Conversely, when a person presents for services because of the family (e.g., *my spouse or kids are nagging me, my parents don't trust me or are on my back all the time*), the alliance is organized around solving the specific problems that motivated that client to seek help (e.g., *help me get my spouse to stop nagging, help me get my parents to*

*give me more freedom and independence*, etc.). Developing a plan when the various family members have different views, concerns, and objectives is the focus of the case example at the conclusion of the chapter.

A structured format for developing an individualized service plan was designed by the *American Society of Addiction Medicine* (ASAM [Hoffmann, Halikas, Mee-Lee and Weedman, 1991; Mee-Lee et al, 2001]). This tool uses six dimensions to organize client information and track services received including:

1. acute intoxication and/or withdrawal potential;
2. medical conditions and complications;
3. emotional, behavioral, or cognitive conditions and complications;
4. readiness or interest in change;
5. potential for relapse or continued use; and
6. living/recovery environment.

When done correctly, the multidimensional assessment criteria (MDA) not only help practitioners identify, organize, and stay focused on what clients want, but also provide suggestions for the type and level of care most congruent with their goals.

Several controlled studies have found that treatment congruent with service plans based on the MDA are associated with less morbidity, better client functioning, and more efficient service utilization than mismatched treatment (Gastfriend & Mee-Lee, 2003). Moreover, a recent survey of 450 private substance abuse treatment agencies conducted by the National Treatment Center (NTC) found that adoption of the ASAM Patient Placement Criteria was associated with program survival. Specifically, programs that had not survived 24 months after the initial survey were less likely to be ASAM adopters and those that closed within six months of the initial survey had even lower adoption rates.

Consider the following two cases as examples of using the MDA to develop an individualized service plan likely to engage a client at the outset of care.

*Tracey*, is a 16-year-old female brought to the emergency room of an acute care hospital by the police. She was taken into custody following an altercation with her parents that culminated in her throwing

a chair. Both the police who responded, and Tracey's parents who called 911, believe that she was under the influence at the time of the incident.

When interviewed by an E.R. physician and a nurse from the hospital's psychiatric unit, Tracey reports that this latest episode was one of many recent clashes at home. These clashes typically start whenever her parents, especially her father, complain about her drinking, late hours, or poor choice of friends. She freely admits to being angry with her parents noting, in particular, that they treat her '*like a toddler rather than a teenager*.' When asked, she says she had been drinking 'some' earlier that evening, but denied using alcohol or drugs on anything more than an occasional basis. '*The problem*,' she maintains, is her parents. '*They are always on my back*.' Until that is resolved, she continues, '*Sending me home is a bad idea*'.

Where the traditional focus of intake and assessment would be on finding a placement for Tracey that fits her psychiatric diagnosis, the emphasis of the MDA is to develop a partnership with clients around the goals, type, and level of interaction desired from the counsellor or system of care. To that end, using the six dimensions, the clinical information presented by Tracey, the police, and her parents, were organized as follows:

#### *1. Acute Intoxication and/or Withdrawal Potential*

Tracey is no longer intoxicated and denies using alcohol or other drugs in large enough quantities over a long enough period to worry about any problems with withdrawal.

#### *2. Biomedical Conditions and Complications*

Tracey indicates that she is not taking any medications and has no complaints of a medical nature. On observation, she appears physically healthy.

#### *3. Emotional, Behavioral or Cognitive Conditions and Complications*

Tracey admits to being frustrated and angry. She confirms throwing the chair but denies being tempted to act on her feelings if separated from the parents.

#### *4. Interest in Change (Readiness)*

Tracey talks openly with the physician and nurse. She views her parents as overbearing and mistrustful,

and expresses interest in 'anything' (e.g., therapy) that will 'get her parents off [her] back.' However, she is clear about not wanting to go home with her parents.

#### *5. Relapse, Continued Use or Continued Problem Potential*

Given Tracey's statements, a reoccurrence of the fighting appears likely if she returns home this evening.

#### *6. Recovery Environment*

Tracey reports considerable discord at home. Her parents, who are in the waiting room at the E.R., report being frustrated and angry, and ask that Tracey be admitted to the hospital.

agreements and MDA are written down and signed by Tracey, her parents, the nurse, and physician. While significant challenges remain, all are engaged and anticipate the services to come by the end of the process.

*Bob*, a 45-year-old man, presents for services at an outpatient alcohol and drug treatment center. It does not take long to determine his goal for treatment either. Within minutes, he says, '*The only reason I'm here is because of the wife. She says she's going to divorce me if I don't get the treatment*.' Bob then continues, '*and don't give me any of that 'one day at*

**... clients whose therapists had access to outcome and alliance information were less likely to deteriorate, more likely to stay longer, and twice as likely to achieve a clinically significant change.**

While both the ER physician and the psychiatric nurse are tempted initially to admit Tracey to the psychiatric unit, at least for the night, a review of the MDA suggests otherwise. Yes, Tracey threw the chair when she was intoxicated. She is no longer 'under the influence,' however, and the incident appears to be directly related to problems at home. In addition, no evidence exists of severe or imminently dangerous biomedical, emotional, behavioral, or cognitive problems that require the resources of a medically managed intensive inpatient setting. Finally, and most important, Tracey views her parents as the problem. As such, hospitalization is more likely to evoke opposition and defiance than engagement and cooperation.

Instead, the physician and nurse use the MDA to provide a structure for an open and collaborative conversation with Tracey and her parents. Everyone present agrees that a physical separation would decrease the chances of another fight. When various options are considered, the family decides to have Tracey stay over night with a trusted relative. Sessions with the family are scheduled for the next day in order to address the difficulties at home. As far as the 'Individualized Service Plan' is concerned, before ending, the various

*a time*,' or '*90 meetings in 90 days' crap. Been there, done that. I don't have no allergy to alcohol. No sir. I got an allergy to my wife. Her nagging.'*

As the interview proceeds, the therapist is careful to avoid any conversation about alcohol dependence or hints that Bob needs to be in a recovery-oriented treatment program. Instead, the majority of time is spent working with Bob to determine the best way to keep his marriage and even, if he wishes, gathering the evidence needed to show his wife that he does not have a drinking problem. In both instances, the MDA provides a structure to explore how best to reach his goal and a written service plan. For example, Bob quickly agrees that his wife's threats about ending the marriage escalated when a recent physical turned up evidence of alcohol-related liver damage (Dimension 2). This visit to the physician was prompted following her complaints about his moodiness (Dimension 3) and recent absenteeism from work (Dimension 6).

At the conclusion of the interview, changes in physical and emotional health (e.g., liver enzymes, general energy, decreased depression) in addition to improved work attendance were simply written into the initial individualized

service plan as formal treatment objectives. His active participation in the services that followed indicates that the plan as constructed matched his view of the problem and goals for therapy.

Naturally, as is true of any relationship, treatment or otherwise, plans change. Time, experience, and even chance events can impact on what people want, are interested in, or are willing to try or do. Any fracturing of consensus between the plan and the client risks disengagement. For this reason, some way to monitor the status of the alliance and progress in treatment is required. In the section that follows, we take a detailed look at methods to obtain and incorporate client feedback in therapy.

### **Formal Client Feedback**

As any experienced clinician knows, therapy is a complex affair, full of nuance and uncertainty. In contrast to examples found in manuals and textbooks — where the treatment, if done in the manner described, seems to flow logically and inexorably toward the pre-determined outcome — most often finding ‘what works’ for a given client proceeds by trial and error.

Traditionally, the frenzy of real world clinical practice has been managed by programming — standardized packages or treatment ‘tracks’ to which clients are assigned and their progress assessed by degree of compliance and movement from one level to the next. In contrast, the client-directed, outcome-informed approach to problem drinking begins with the experience and outcome the client desires, then works backwards to create the means by which those will be achieved. All along, the client is in charge, helping to fine-tune or alter, continue or end treatment via ongoing feedback.

While most therapists strive to listen and be responsive to clients, available data suggests that they are not, despite their best efforts, alert to treatment failure (Lambert et al, 2003). Moreover, a virtual mountain of evidence shows that clinical judgments with regard to the alliance and progress in treatment are inferior to formal client feedback (Duncan, Miller, & Sparks, 2004).

Gathering feedback begins with finding measures of process and outcome that are valid, reliable, and feasible for

the context in which the tools will be employed (Duncan & Miller, 2000). In reality, no ‘perfect’ measure exists. Simple, brief, and therefore user-friendly measures, for example, are likely to be less reliable. At the same time, any gains in reliability and validity associated with a longer and more complicated measure are likely to be offset by decreases in feasibility.

In our own work and research, an effective balance for obtaining feedback regarding the client’s experience of treatment process was achieved with the Session Rating Scale 3.0 (SRS; Miller, Duncan, & Johnson, 2000).<sup>2</sup> Briefly, the SRS is a 4-item measure of the therapeutic alliance that takes less than a minute to complete and score and is available in both written and oral forms in several different languages. In addition to being practical, the scale possesses sound psychometric qualities and has been applied in a variety of clinical settings with positive effect (e.g.,outpatient, inpatient, residential, group, individual, and family therapy). Most important, studies have found the SRS to be a valid measure of those qualities of the therapeutic relationship noted earlier to be associated with retention in and outcome from treatment (Duncan, Miller, Reynolds, Sparks, Claud, Brown & Johnson, 2004).

To obtain feedback with regard to the client’s experience of change, we use the Outcome Rating Scale (ORS; Miller & Duncan, 2000). Similar in structure to the SRS, the ORS is a 4-item visual analog scale. Clients simply place a hash mark on a line nearest the pole that best describes their experience. The measure takes less than a minute to administer and score, is available in both written and oral forms in several languages. Research to date indicates that the scale possesses good psychometric qualities, with estimates of internal consistency and test-retest reliability at .74 and .66, respectively (Miller et al., 2003). The same research shows that the ORS is a valid measure of the outcomes most likely to result from the treatment offered at the settings in which we work (i.e.,change in individual, relational, and social functioning). Finally, and of critical importance when selecting an outcome tool, the ORS has been shown to be sensitive to change in those

undergoing treatment while being stable in a non-treated population (Miller et al. 2003). As Vermeersch, Lambert, & Burlingame (2000) point out, many scales presently in use were not designed specifically to be sensitive to change, but rather to assess stable personality traits or a specific problematic behavior (e.g.,DSM diagnostic categories, MAST [Michigan Alcoholism Screening Test], AUDIT [Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test], ASI [Addiction Severity Index], etc.).

Incorporating the outcome and process tools into treatment can be as simple as scoring and discussing results together with clients at each session, or as complex as an automated, computer-based data entry, scoring, and interpretation software program. The approach chosen will depend on the needs, aims, and resources of the user. Regardless of the method, the purpose of the scales is always explained to clients and their active participation solicited prior to the formal initiation of treatment.

As for the actual interpretation of the results, a single-subject case design in which measures are hand-scored and results tracked and discussed from session to session will suffice for most practitioners. The SRS, for example, is administered at the end of each session. Ordinarily, scores of 36 or below are considered cause for concern as they fall at the 25th percentile of those who complete the measure. Because research indicates that clients frequently drop out of treatment before discussing problems in the alliance, a therapist would use the opportunity provided by the scale to open discussion about the relationship, review the individualized service plan, and remedy whatever discrepancies exist between what the client wants and is receiving (Bachelor & Horvath, 1999).

On the other hand, the ORS is typically given at or near the start of each visit. Higher rates of client drop out or poor or negative treatment outcomes are associated with an absence of improvement in the first handful of visits when the majority of client change occurs (Duncan, Miller, & Sparks, 2004). In such instances, the MDA can provide a structure to review the type and level of treatment being offered as well as suggest alternatives. As the

MDA make abundantly clear, failure at one type or level of care does not automatically warrant an intensification of services, but rather a review of the individualized service plan (Mee-Lee, Shulman, Fishman, Gastfriend, & Griffith (2001). Neither should a client have to experience a poor outcome at a lower level of service before being admitted to a more intensive treatment option. The available research shows that where a client worsens in the initial stages of treatment, or responds poorly to care by the eighth session (or measure of outcome), they are at significant risk for dropping out or ending treatment unsuccessfully. In these instances a change of therapists or treatment settings is almost always warranted. (Duncan, Miller, & Sparks, 2004).

A special index on the ORS known as the 'clinical cut off' can provide a check on decisions made via the MDA about the intensity of treatment (e.g., outpatient versus inpatient, treatment versus education or supportive care). Brown et al. (1999) and Miller, Duncan, Brown, Sorrell, & Chalk (2004) found that as many as one-third of clients entering treatment started with a score on the outcome tool that exceeded the clinical cut off (a score of 25 or higher on the ORS). Such clients are at significant risk for worsening rather than improving over the course of treatment. Encouraging therapists to adopt a strengths-based or problem-solving approach in lieu of depth-oriented, confrontational, or other intensive treatment strategies can serve to maximize engagement while minimizing the risk of client deterioration.

In situations that include multiple participants or stakeholders (e.g., family or group therapy, court-referred clients, etc.) the same general guidelines for interpreting the scales apply. At the same time, the kind of information sought by the measure and the manner in which it is used during treatment varies depending on the specific circumstances involved. As an example, consider the case of mandated clients. In our experience, it is common for such people to score above the clinical cut off on the ORS ( $> 25$ ). Rather than trying to convince the client that matters are actually worse than he or she might think, the client's view of

the referral source's rating of them is plotted and used to assess change over the course of treatment (Duncan, Miller, & Sparks, 2004). In such cases, the client and therapist are technically working together to resolve the problem that the referent (court, employer, family, etc.) has with the client.

A similar procedure can be followed in family therapy when the focus of concern is on a particular person, the so-called 'identified patient' (Duncan, Miller, & Sparks, 2004). Moreover, where differences of opinion exist, a graph on which each family member's outcome score is plotted in a different color provides a simple yet effective structure for stimulating a manageable and inclusive discussion about who is most interested in change, what the problem is, and what needs to happen for improvement. A graph containing each member's response on the SRS can, in turn, be used to monitor engagement, and provide both the family and therapist with an opportunity to reach out to any one feeling excluded from the process. The process is virtually the same when treatment is delivered via groups — the underlying principle being to utilize the scales in a manner that increases the engagement of everyone involved.

Consider the case of Ted, a 47-year-old man who presented for outpatient services after being confronted about his drinking by his wife Sharon and their three adult children. Given that Ted wanted to 'do anything' to save his marriage, couples therapy became a part of the individualized service plan developed at the first visit. Not surprisingly, the couple's scores on the ORS and SRS differed significantly. The therapist began asking Ted and Sharon at each visit to guess how the other would rate the session and progress, and any differences were then discussed.

At one session, for example, Ted rated the alliance high, while Sharon scored quite low. On inspecting the measure, it was clear that the difference centered on a disagreement over the goals of the therapy. The content of the hour had focused almost exclusively on Ted's problematic use of alcohol. However, when asked, Sharon indicated that she was less concerned about the drinking than she was about the affairs her

husband had when he drank. As one can imagine, discussion of this important difference created a significant change to the focus of the couple's therapy.

While the single-subject design described profits from ease and simplicity of use, it suffers in terms of precision and reliability. The broad guidelines for evaluating progress are based on data pooled over a large number of clients. Because the amount and speed of change in treatment varies depending on how an individual client scores at the first session, such suggestions are likely to underestimate the amount of change necessary for some cases (i.e., those starting treatment with a lower score on the outcome measure) while overestimating it in others (i.e., those with a higher initial score). A simple linear regression model offers a more precise method to predict the score at the end of treatment (or at any intermediate point in treatment) based on the score at intake. Using the slope and an intercept, a regression formula can be calculated for all clients in a given sample. Once completed, the formula is used to calculate the expected outcome for any new client based on the intake score.

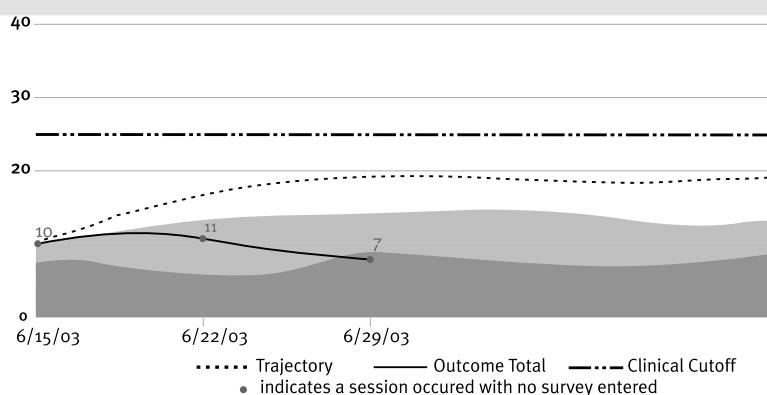
Miller et al (2004) used linear regression as part of a computerized feedback system employed in a large healthcare organization. Figure 1 depicts the outcome of treatment derived from an ORS administered at the beginning of each session of therapy with a sample client. The dotted line represents the expected trajectory of change for clients at this clinic whose total score is four at the initial visit. In contrast, the solid line plots the client's actual score from session to session. As can be seen, the two lines are divergent, with this client reporting significantly less progress than average. In fact, scores falling in the solid dark area represent the 10th percentile of responders. As a result, the therapist receives a 'red' signal, warning of the potential for premature drop out or negative outcome should therapy continue unchanged. An option button provides suggestions including everything from simply reviewing the matter with the client to, depending on amount of time in treatment, referring the client elsewhere. Client responses on the SRS were plotted in a similar fashion at the end of each visit. Scores falling

below the 25th and 10th percentiles triggered a yellow (solid light grey area in Fig 1) and red signal (solid dark grey in Fig 1), respectively. The program further encouraged therapists to check in with their client and express concern about their work together. Exploring options for changing the interaction before ending the session is critical as available research indicates that clients rarely report problems with the relationship until they have already decided to terminate (Bachelor & Horvath, 1999).

There are two related advantages of automated data entry and feedback. The first is the ability to compare the customer service (e.g., alliance) and effectiveness levels of different clinicians and treatment sites. Research indicates, for example, that 'who' the therapist is accounts for six to nine times as much variance in outcome as 'what' treatment approach is employed (Lambert, 1989; Luborsky, Crits-Christoph, McLellan, Woody, Piper, Liberman, Imber, & Pilkonis, 1986; Luborsky, McLellan, Duguer, Woody, & Seligman, 1997; Wampold, 2001). Being able to compare therapists not only allows for the identification of therapists in need of training or supervision, but also those with reliably superior results — an obvious benefit to both payers and consumers (Lambert, Whipple, Bishop, Vermeersch, Gray, & Finch, 2002).

To illustrate, consider data on 22 therapists reported by Miller et al. (2004) in Figure 2. In this sample, a therapist is statistically 'above average' at a 70% confidence interval when the bottom end

**Figure 1: SIGNAL Outcome Feedback Screen**



This client is at severe risk for poor outcome or drop-out. Talk to the client about their experience of counseling so far and explore options of change. Click the "Additional Options" button for more information

#### ADDITIONAL COUNSELING METHODS

##### Generating Options

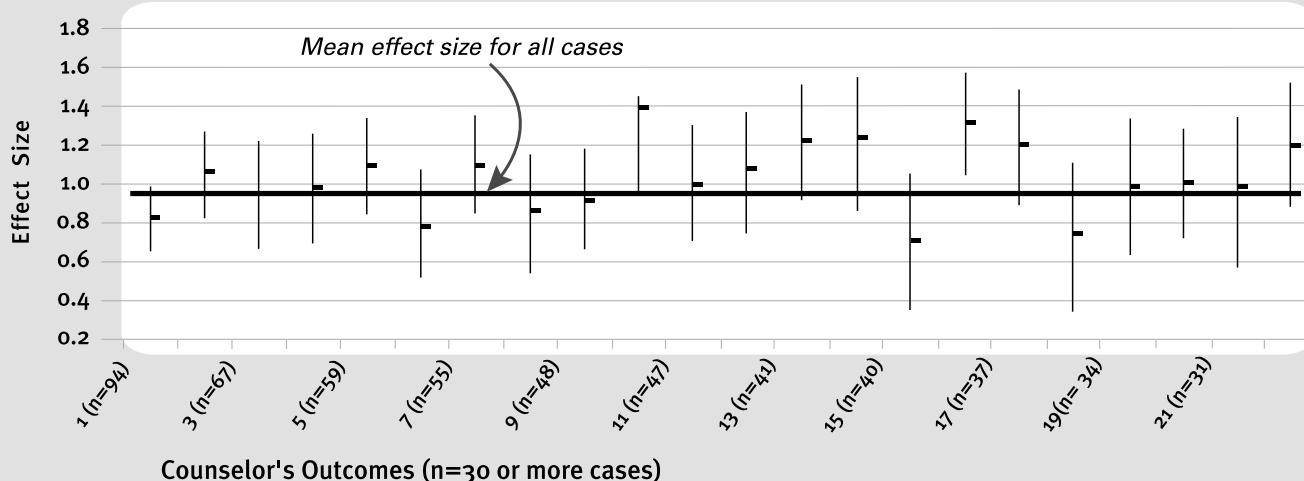
- Using a different approach aligned with client theory of change
- Having this call monitored by another counselor/supervisor
- Recording the call to share with your counseling team for different perspectives
- Talking to another counselor about these issues

of his or her range falls above the average effect size for the agency as a whole. A number of current research projects are attempting to identify any differences in practice between the effective and ineffective providers that might serve to inform therapy in the future (Johnson & Miller, in preparation). Of perhaps greater importance, while having documented tremendous improvements in cases at risk for a negative or null outcome, Lambert (2003, personal communication)<sup>3</sup> has not found that the overall effectiveness of individual therapists improves with time and feedback. If confirmed, such findings,

taken in combination with the weak historical link between training and outcome in therapy (Lambert & Ogles, 2004), further underscore the need to spend less time and resources training clinicians in new treatment approaches, and more time helping them solicit and use formal client feedback to guide services.

In a similar way, automatic data entry and feedback can be used to provide real-time quality and outcome assurance for traditionally underrepresented and underserved client groups (e.g., diagnostic, low-income, ethnocultural, etc.). Much has

**Figure 2: comparison of effect sizes of 22 therapists in a single agency**



been written of late with regard to the importance of cultural competence in clinical work with clients from different ethnic groups. As Clarkin & Levy (2004) point out, however, '*Unfortunately, the clinical wisdom offered for maximizing treatment benefits is seldom studied and remains largely untested*' (p. 204). In fact, the mix of 'culturally sensitive' stereotypes swirling inside the therapist's interpretive head may actually diminish the quality of connection with a particular client. In contrast, Duncan & Miller (2000) describe a step-by-step process starting with the selection of the measures used, through data gathering and norm derivation, to insure that feedback is representative of and generalizable to the particular client being treated. As was the case with therapists and settings, such data can be used to identify effective practices, settings, and clinicians, as well as quality improvement opportunities for different client groups.

### **Integrating the plan and feedback into a flexible continuum of care**

Historically, treatment was synonymous with completion of a program of predetermined length and a fixed number of steps or modules. Problem drinkers were sent to 'rehab' for whatever length of time third-party payers would cover. While its origins are now long forgotten, the once popular '28-day stay' in residential treatment was not a product of science, but rather a result of limits on reimbursement imposed by insurers (Institute of Medicine, 1990).

Unfortunately, the evidence indicates that programming often took precedence over client preference in such settings and, in turn, had a negative impact on client engagement and retention.

If a key to effective services exists, it is flexibility. As a result, when client-directed and outcome-informed, treatment contains no fixed program content, length of stay, or levels of care. Instead, a continuum of possibilities is made available to the client that includes everything from community resources, natural alliances with the family and significant others, to formal treatment and care within healthcare institutions. Literally, everything is 'on the table.' Along the way, the MDA and formal client feedback provide a structure for collaborating with the client in the development, continuation, modification, or termination of contact. As the old saying from Alcoholic's Anonymous goes, '*The question is not if we should help but instead when and how.*'

Borrowing an example from business, a 'flexible continuum of care' offers the benefits associated with large discount chains where a wide number of products are available in one place and at a good price, with the individual attention and customer service typically reserved for fashionable boutiques. When the setting and resources are limited in scope, such as private practice or rural settings, practitioners serve their clients best by following another standard business practice: outsourcing. Even under the most optimal conditions, no provider or system of care can be 'all things to all

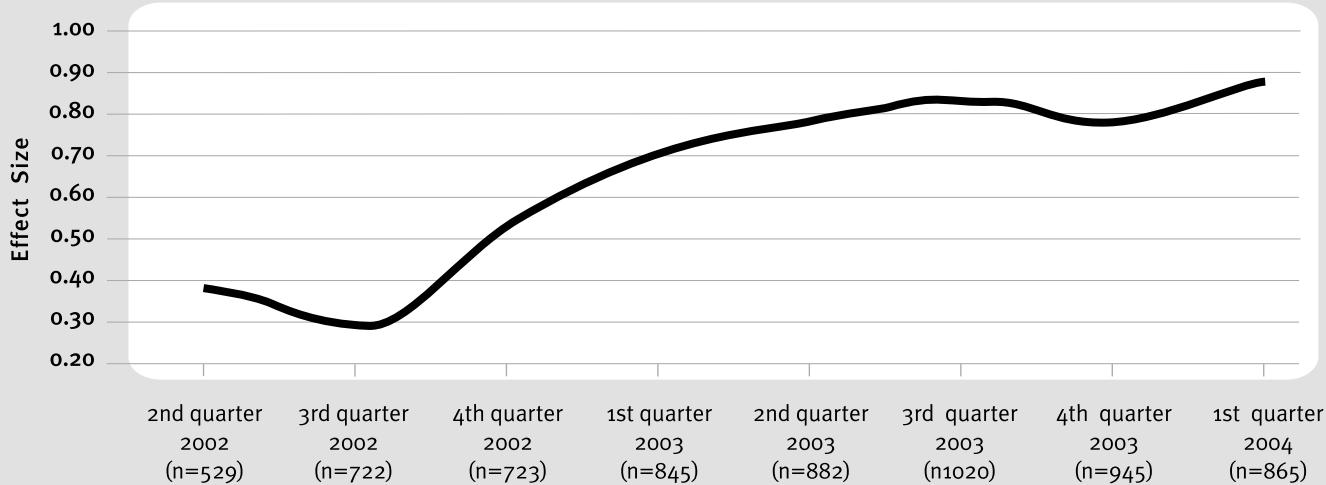
people.' When formal client feedback indicates that the partnership with a particular therapist or treatment center is not working, a network of informal, yet organized contacts in the local community insures continuity of care across a virtually limitless continuum of possibilities (e.g., church, service and support groups, volunteer organizations, community leaders, local healers, contacts via e-mail or the Internet, etc.).

### **Research evidence that supports client-directed, outcome informed clinical work**

*Frothy eloquence neither convinces or satisfies me...you've got to show me.*  
William Duncan Vandiver

A number of empirical studies, including one meta-analysis, document significant improvement in retention rates and outcome from therapies that incorporate formal, ongoing client feedback with regard to both the process and outcome of treatment (Lambert, Whipple, Smart, Vermeersch, Nielsen, & Hawkins, 2001; Lambert et al. 2002; Whipple et al. 2003; Lambert et al. 2003). In a study of several thousand cases (Miller et al. 2004), the use of process and outcome feedback effectively doubled the average effect size of clinical services (.4 to .86) and significantly lowered drop out rates (see Figure 3). Clients of therapists who failed to obtain feedback on the alliance were twice as likely to drop out of treatment, and three to four times more likely to have

**Figure 3. Improvement in effect size following feedback**



a negative or null outcome. Notably, retention and success rates in this study improved the moment formal feedback became available to clinicians and without any attempt to organize, systematize or otherwise control treatment process or training in any new diagnostic or treatment procedures. Similar to the study by Whipple et al. (2003), formal client feedback was the only constant in an otherwise diverse treatment environment.

It is important to note that improved outcomes were observed whether the clients were seeking help for a mental health concern, alcohol or substance problem, or a combination of the two. Indeed, if anything, those being treated exclusively for problems related to their use of alcohol fared better. Specifically, the average client in the study was better off than approximately 70% of people without the benefit of formal treatment (E.S. = .80), while those treated for drug and alcohol problems were better off than 86% (E.S. = 1.13).

In summary, the results of Miller et al. (2004) and other studies cited above are compelling enough for Lambert et al. (2004) to argue that clinicians begin '*routinely and formally to monitor patient response*' (p. 288). Clearly, the treatment effects associated with so-called empirically supported psychotherapies are much smaller (Feedback E.S. = .39 versus Average E.S. difference = .20, p. 296). More research remains to be done as most studies to date have focused on services delivered to adults in outpatient settings or via the telephone. Projects aimed at determining the degree to which the approach applies across modes of service delivery (e.g., inpatient, residential, group), consumer groups (e.g., children, adolescents, elderly, mandated versus voluntary), and specific treatment issues (e.g., substance abuse, psychosis, etc.) are currently underway.

## Case Example

*...personal perspective...is the only kind of history that exists.*

Joyce Carol Oates

Heather is a 21-year-old female who agreed to meet with a counsellor for an assessment after being confronted

by her parents about her use of alcohol and cocaine. Over the preceding year, this once outgoing young adult had dropped out of college, become pregnant following unprotected sex with a stranger while intoxicated, began dealing drugs, and spent \$20,000 feeding her growing habit. In addition to losing many of her close friends, recently Heather had come under the surveillance of the local police. When word spread that a bust was imminent, a former college friend who had a contact within the police department tipped Heather's parents.

Although Heather acknowledged her use of alcohol and drugs readily, she refused to obtain help initially, and insisted instead that she could quit on her own. Exasperated and concerned, her parents offered Heather an ultimatum. She could come home at once and get substance abuse counselling, or continue living with her two drug-dealing roommates, and face whatever personal and legal consequences followed alone. They also informed her that if she chose the latter alternative they would contact the police to share what they knew about their daughter. Thankfully, Heather chose to enter treatment, and attended her first appointment with her parents.

The agency where Heather sought treatment is the second largest provider of substance abuse services in her home state, and encompasses a broad continuum of care that includes medical detoxification, residential, intensive outpatient, and individual and family outpatient services. In any given year, this center serves approximately 6000 culturally and economically diverse clients ranging in age from 15 to 80 years. From 1997 to the present, the agency underwent a radical transformation, shifting from a fixed length, diagnosis-driven, and 'one size fits all' treatment program to a 'state of the art' client-directed, outcome-informed service delivery system. Once suffering poor staff morale, high client attrition rates, and near economic collapse, the agency now enjoys a large economic surplus, high rates of client retention and satisfaction, and a highly engaged and motivated staff. Outcome and alliance data gathered at the treatment center using the ORS and SRS since summer 2002 compare favorably with data reported by Miller et al. (2004).

Typically, the initial contact with clients at the agency where Heather sought care is limited to the person with the identified drug or alcohol problem. Clients are often guarded about sharing information when the family is present, particularly in cases involving abuse or neglect. In this instance, however, Heather's parents asked to be present during the first part of the initial session. Heather agreed, and the meeting began with the administration of the ORS.

Next, the therapist scored the instrument. Importantly, everyone fell below the 'clinical cutoff' of 25, with Heather at a total score of 16 and her parents rating somewhat lower (Mother = 12; Father = 10). Each family member scored more like people who are in treatment and looking for a change. These results, as well as the philosophy of client-directed, outcome-informed work, were then explained to the family.

Therapist: *Thank you for taking the time to fill out the forms.*

Heather: That's Ok.

Parents: We're just glad you're here...

T: *Well, thank you, and, let me start by repeating a bit of what I told you on the phone. At the center, we are really dedicated to helping people get what they want from treatment. And this is one of the forms that will help with that.*

Father: Uh huh, OK.

T: *Here's how it works. Basically, the research says that if we're going to be helpful, we should see signs of that sooner rather than later.*

H: (nodding).

T: *Now, that doesn't mean that the minute things start improving, we're going to say, 'Get out!'*

H: (laughing).

Mother: Good.

T: *No, it just means that everyone's feedback is essential. It will tell us if our work together is on the right track, or whether we need to change something about it, or, if we're not helping — that happens sometimes — when we need to consider making a referral to some one or some place else in order to help you get what you want.*

H and P: (nod).

T: *Does that make sense to you?*

H and P: (nodding). Yes.

T: *And so, let me show you what these scores look like. Um, basically this kind of gives us a snap shot of how things are*

*overall in your lives and family.*

H and P: (lean forward to view graph).

T: ...*this graph tells us how things are overall in your life. And, uh, if a score falls below this dotted line...*

H: Uh huh.

T: *Then it means that the scores are more like people who are in therapy and who are saying that there are some things they'd like to change or feel better about...*

M: Looks like we're all feeling that way...that something needs to change...

T: Yes..it does...and we'll be working to get the scores above that line...

F: That could take a long while. This is a pretty serious situ...

H: (interrupting). Dad!

T: *Well...as long as there is measurable change, and you want to continue, we can continue to work together as long as you like...but this will just help us stay on track. And you can see, you're pretty much in agreement here...with each of you saying that you're feeling like there are things that need to change in your lives...*

Everyone expressed agreement with the therapist's last statement, and a lively discussion followed. About midway through the visit, a natural break in the conversation occurred and the therapist asked to speak with Heather alone. Heather's parents agreed and left the interviewing room. It was during this time that Heather disclosed her pregnancy, indicating further that she wanted this information to be kept confidential for the present.

As the end of the interview neared, Heather's parents were invited back into the room. The therapist then used the six dimensions of the MDA to both organize the information presented and initiate a dialogue about the type and level of service desired.

T: *We have a lot of choices when it comes to services. And so, uh, we've found it helpful, when trying to figure out where to go and what to do, to look at everything you've talked about in terms of six different areas.*

H: Uh huh.

Parents: (nodding).

T: *Here are the six areas, and I'll read them just like they are written. The first is 'acute intoxication or withdrawal potential.' That means are you high now or have you been using enough that we need to be concerned. And, Heather, you said earlier that you haven't used for over a*

*week. Is that right?*

H: Yeah.

T: *And so, that means that we don't need to send you like to detox so that you could be monitored by a doctor and such...*

H: Uh huh.

T: *The second is, 'biomedical conditions.' Heather indicates that she is in good health...*

P: (nodding).

H: Mmm huh.

Dimension 2 of the MDA is the appropriate area for recording important biological and health-related data such as pregnancy. While documented in the medical record, this information was, given Heather's wishes, not shared with her parents. The discussion continued uninterrupted:

T: *OK. Emotional, behavioral, cognitive disorders or conditions. We talked about this, and the main reason you're here is because of the alcohol and drugs, right?*

H: Yes.

T: *And all of you said that no one has ever been in counselling before for any other kind of problem?*

H and P: (nodding).

T: *Again...that basically tells us that we can focus on the alcohol and drugs...because before all this, you were doing really well...you've been a good student, you've always had a lot of friends...*

F: Right.

T: *The next area is 'interest in or readiness for change.' And if I've understood this correctly, you're saying, Heather, that you're ready...*

H: Yeah.

T: *And mostly, you're concerned about how all this has affected your relationship with your parents?*

H: Yeah...cause I think I can quit on my own...but they don't think so...and so, I don't want to lose them...and I know how concerned they...we've got to get back to where we were before...able to talk. Like I said, my Mom and Dad have always been my best friends...and this has really screwed it all up.

F: We want that too.

T: *OK. Getting close here... Dimension 5: Continued use, relapse, continued Problem Potential. You said you're still having cravings.*

H: (nodding).

T: *So...this is an issue...and this is also where your Mom and Dad fit in because you said that you know you need their*

*help to deal with that...so at a minimum, in terms of services, we do want to have everyone involved in some way...*

H and P: (nodding).

F: Like family sessions or something.

T: *Exactly, right...and that fits really well with the next area, 'recovery environment.' You're planning to stay at home. Everyone agrees that there won't be any contact with your old roommates... and that as long as there is no drug or alcohol use, your parents will help pay your bills...and so it makes sense that we work together in some family sessions...to get things back on track. Does that sound right?*

Heather and her parents agreed, and the interview concluded with a plan for intensive outpatient services and weekly family sessions. As discussed, the initial focus of the individual work would be on her use of alcohol and drugs, in particular dealing with her cravings for cocaine. At the same time, meetings with the family would center on restoring relationships via improved communication. Just prior to ending the visit, the therapist asked everyone to complete the SRS. From the scores, all appeared to be satisfied with the therapist, the interview, and the plan for services.

In the weeks that followed, Heather and her parents followed through with the service plan that was developed in the first meeting. Each person's scores on the ORS showed gradual and steady improvement, indicating that the combination of intensive outpatient services and family sessions were working. Scores on the SRS remained high throughout. While one might wonder what the therapist actually did in the sessions that led to such scores, it is important to remember that from a client-directed, outcome-informed point of view, the therapeutic approach employed is irrelevant. Critical to success is a plan for services that fits with the client's subjective experience of the alliance and improvement early in the treatment process.

By the fourth week, communication had improved enough for Heather to feel comfortable telling her parents about the pregnancy. She did so at home. According to the family, this was a major milestone. Indeed, the discussion had gone so well that the family had been able to come to an agreement about what to do prior to their session that week. The

pregnancy would be ended. In fact, an appointment for an abortion had already been made.

Scores on the ORS confirmed the family's view of progress. Everyone had passed the clinical cut off ( $> 25$ ) and the scores even appeared to be leveling off. While historically seen as problematic, such 'plateauing' is common, and can be used to guide decisions with regard to treatment intensity. Research suggests, for example, that the probability of change is maximized by meeting clients on a more regular basis in the beginning of treatment when the slope of change is steep. On the other hand, change is best maintained by spacing visits as the rate of change decreases (c.f., Howard et al., 1986). In any event, when this research and the family's results on the ORS were discussed, all agreed to less intensive services. Heather would leave the intensive outpatient program, but continue her weekly sessions with an individual counsellor. At the same time, the family would continue to meet as a group on a monthly basis.

In a family session six months later, Heather reported that she had used alcohol on a couple of occasions in the company of friends. At this point, she was working full time and still living at home. There had been no contact with her drug dealing roommates and no further use of cocaine. What's more, Heather's parents were aware she had been drinking. Everyone agreed, however, that communication continued to be good. In fact, Heather had approached her parent's prior to drinking to discuss 'having a beer' with friends after seeing a movie. According to her parents, Heather had continued to keep reasonable hours and had not returned home intoxicated.

When the therapist expressed concern, fearing it would lead to a relapse to cocaine abuse, or simply increased drinking, Heather's father responded, 'It's not like we think she has to be a 'teatotaller' or something,' and then added, 'we just don't want her to get hurt, and to be responsible.' And, in truth, abstinence from alcohol had never been one of Heather's or her parent's goals for treatment. All felt that the services they had received had been helpful. 'The key is that we're talking again,' Heather's mother concluded, 'We're all confident

*that will continue.'* The session concluded with a brief review of the six dimensions of the MDA and the SRS. Within weeks, the family discussed ending ongoing treatment, opting for sessions in the future on 'as needed' basis. At last report, Heather had rented an apartment near her parents home. She was working full time, planning on returning to school, and had no further problems with alcohol or cocaine.

### Conclusion

More than any time in the history of the field, policy makers and payers are insisting stridently that to be paid, therapists, and the systems of care in which they operate, must 'deliver the goods.' Consumers are also demanding results. Indeed, while stigma, lack of knowledge, and concerns about the length of treatment are offered frequently as explanations, a significantly larger number of potential consumers identify low confidence in the outcome of services as the major deterrent to seeking care (76% versus 53%, 47%, & 59% respectively [APA, 1998]).

In an attempt to provide effective and efficient services, the field of alcohol and drug treatment has embraced the notion of 'evidence-based' practice. The idea behind this perspective is that specific techniques or approaches, once identified and delivered in reliable and consistent fashion, will work to enhance success. Of course, we believe the data indicate otherwise. We have presented here a much simpler method to ensure effective, efficient, and accountable treatment services. Instead of attempting to match clients to treatments via evidence-based practice, the client-directed, outcome-informed perspective uses 'practice-based' evidence to tailor services to the individual client.

In closing, imagine a treatment system in which clients are full and complete partners in their care, where their voice is used to structure and direct treatment. Gone, and gladly forgotten, will be the countless hours devoted to the generation of histories, interview protocols, and treatment programming. Notes and documentation will report events in treatment that have a direct bearing on outcome. Gone, too, will be the attitude that therapists know what is best for their clients. When it is more important to

know whether change is occurring in any given circumstance, theories of therapy and the many diagnostic labels they have sponsored, become distractions. Therapists will no longer be evaluated on how well they 'talk the talk,' at best a dubious standard for competence, but by how they 'walk the walk.' It may feel disconcerting, even suspect, to have the client's input from one session to the next for those reared on the belief that change, should it occur at all, is an internal and arcane experience, long in coming, and perhaps unmeasurable. However, failing to respond to the demands of payers, policy makers, and consumers is sure to court exclusion. Better to know what is working or not in the here and now, than mere failure down the road.

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#### Footnotes

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- Individual practitioners can download copies of the SRS and ORS for free at: [www.talkingcure.com](http://www.talkingcure.com)
- In an email to the first author, July 3, 2003, Lambert said: '*The question is—have therapists learned anything from having gotten feedback? Or, do the gains disappear when feedback disappears?*' On the same question we found little improvement from year to year despite therapists receiving feedback on half their cases for over 3 years. It appears that therapists do not learn how to detect failing cases. Remember that in our studies the feedback has no effect on cases who are progressing as expected - only the signal alarm cases profit from feedback.

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