

The purpose of this page is to offer information that may further readers' understanding of the medical, legal and social aspects of alcoholism; the severity and international scope of the illness; and the worldwide efforts being made to combat it. Publication here does not imply endorsement or affiliation. AA does not conduct or participate in research, nor does it hold any opinion on research conducted by others.

## Landmark Study: AA Works

### AN INTERVIEW

In 2020, a rigorous independent study published by the medical journal *Cochrane Database of Systematic Review*, examining 25 previous studies around the world, found that AA works as well or better than other scientifically proven treatments for alcoholism. We asked study coauthors Dr. John Kelly of Harvard University and Dr. Keith Humphreys of Stanford University, experts in the field of addiction research, to speak with Grapevine about their findings.

**Grapevine:** This may seem like a simplistic question—but how do researchers define an addiction to alcohol?

**Dr. Kelly:** We have this spectrum called alcohol use disorder. Much of it depends on how intensely and how long and in what fashion you've been using



A recent independent study of research about AA's effectiveness reveals a surprising success rate.

alcohol. Typically what we know from the research is that on the more severe end of the spectrum, alcohol has the ability to take over someone's life, like any psychoactive drug. Alcohol is the world's most popular drug. It's also the world's most lethal drug. But there are degrees. There are people who drink heavily, but their lives don't go out of control. Other people have more volatile drinking histories, have more accidents and so on, and also may reach greater levels of intoxication when they drink.

**Grapevine:** Before

embarking on this study, had either of you had much experience with or knowledge of AA or how it works?

**Dr. Humphreys:** To be honest, I thought it was stupid. Nothing personal. I'm just giving you the context of my life at the time. I had worked hard to become trained to help people who are addicted and then here are these untrained people working in the same area. People I looked up to looked down on AA. That was the attitude I absorbed.

**Dr. Kelly:** I think that like many people in a research field, I had some initial

skepticism with AA. What happened was that about 30 years ago the Institute of Medicine of National Academies of Sciences called for more research on AA and all its mechanisms. For the first time, people began bringing serious science to bear on AA in order to look at the efficacy of the behavioral change through which AA confers benefits.

**Dr. Humphreys:** Like a number of other researchers, we both began to see AA as having great potential, great public health value, and we felt that in the popular media there was unfair criticism out there. Between 2006 and 2017 there was a vast array of studies that really pointed to the fact that AA worked and that it was helpful. So what we wanted to do was update the science

**Grapevine:** The studies you aggregated were pretty sizeable—150 scientists, 67 institutions, almost 11,000 people. What specifically did you find?

**Dr. Humphreys:** The bottom line is that people who experience TSF [Twelve Step Facilitation] in AA are 20-60% more likely to end up abstinent than they

are with other treatments like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, outpatient treatment delivered by a mental health professional, meditation or certain educational programs. That's pretty incredible for this peer-oriented, grass-roots organization. If you thought about this like cancer treatment, or in any other field of medi-

**This study is public access....If someone says AA is a bunch of crap, hand it to them. When you're talking about a disease that kills 3.3 million people...this is something you have to pay attention to.**

cine, you would be doing backflips over a success rate like this.

**Dr. Kelly:** We looked at the number of days when patients didn't drink anything. The farther out you get, the magnitude of difference increases. AA was more effective than other treatments at keeping people completely abstinent at every time

point over a three year span. Also, even if people drank again, they didn't drink as much after having been to AA, as compared to other therapies. And one more thing: AA is what I've referred to as "the closest thing we have in health care to a free lunch." It saves the health care system money, the criminal justice system money. Our review showed that AA has the ability to effect much higher remission rates at a lower cost, sometimes much lower, than other therapies.

**Grapevine:** My sense is that this study will provide an important boost for AA, for AA members and for people thinking about seeking out AA.

**Dr. Kelly:** When the *New York Times* article on this study came out, it stayed on the "Most Read" and "Most Emailed" lists for days. This study is public access, free to anyone. If someone says AA is a bunch of crap, hand it to them. When you're talking about a disease that kills 3.3 million people around the world, this is something you have to pay attention to

To read the full interview, visit [aagrapevine.org/AALJune2021](http://aagrapevine.org/AALJune2021)