

Alcohol researchers cleared of fraud

An investigative committee established by the Addiction Research Foundation in Ontario, Canada, has concluded that two Foundation scientists were "careless" but not fraudulent in conducting research on alcoholism treatment more than a decade ago. The final report of the committee, while cleansing the personal reputations of the two psychologists, leaves in doubt the fundamental conclusion of the original research — that addicted alcoholics can be taught to be controlled drinkers.

Based on a review of original research data, the committee concluded last week that there is "no reasonable cause to doubt the scientific or personal integrity" of Mark and Linda Sobell. The Sobells carried out the treatment study in the early 1970s while at Patton State Hospital in California; they found that severely ill alcoholics, taught with behavior therapy to control their drinking, did better in a two-year follow up than control subjects who tried to quit altogether.

The committee was set up last June in anticipation of a report by three California scientists who, based on an independent follow up of the original subjects, challenged the Sobells' data and conclusions. Published in the July 9 *SCIENCE* (SN: 7/10/82, p. 20), the research by Mary L. Pendery of the San Diego Veterans Administration Medical Center and Irving M. Maltzman and L. Jolyon West of the University of California at Los Angeles indicated that the Sobells had not interviewed the subjects as often as they claimed and that their published success stories were false.

The four-person investigative committee, headed by University of Toronto law professor Bernard M. Dickens, refutes most of Pendery's charges, including those made in a widely circulated early draft of the *SCIENCE* article. According to the committee report, the Sobells' published outcome data are accurate and provide "no evidence of fraud, deception, dishonesty or unethical behavior." The committee also found no evidence to support Pendery's allegation that the research subjects were chosen in such a way as to bias the findings.

The committee did find, however, that the Sobells failed to carry out the rigorous follow up that they described in their publications. Although they were not as negligent as the Pendery critique suggests, the Sobells' interviews with patients were much rarer than every three to four weeks, as they claimed. The committee concludes that, although "the Sobells did not do what they said they did," the discrepancy is a matter of carelessness rather than deceit.

It is unclear whether or not this carelessness affected the Sobells' re-

search results, the committee report states. And indeed, Dickens told *SCIENCE NEWS*, the personal exoneration of the Sobells says nothing about the validity of their findings, which, he says, might be challenged on methodological grounds. The committee explicitly takes no position on whether or not controlled drinking is an appropriate treatment goal for physically addicted alcoholics; that remains a scientific question for the alcoholism researchers to answer, Dickens says.

Pendery expressed disappointment that the committee chose not to address the larger issue and instead restricted itself to weighing the Sobells' intentions. "The report doesn't change anything about the most important point," Pendery says, "which is that the patients in the controlled drinking experiment did not do well. They were not able to become controlled drinkers. My hope is that the Dick-

ens committee will not create confusion in the public mind, which could be dangerous." The Dickens committee requested Pendery's participation in the investigation, but Pendery, on the advice of her attorneys, refused.

The committee did not assess an earlier replication of the Sobells' work, which concluded that the Sobells' subjects continued to do well as controlled drinkers three years after release from the hospital. Pendery and her colleagues also questioned the integrity of that work, which was done by psychologists Glenn Caddy of Nova University in Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., and David Perkins of California State University at Fullerton. Because the Sobells' research involved public funds, the federal Department of Health and Human Services and the House committee on science and technology are considering investigations of their own. —*W. Herbert*

Good news for caffeine consumers?

Caffeine does not cause birth defects, pancreatic cancer, heart attacks or fibrocystic breast disease in humans. It produces no marked behavioral changes in children, even in hyperactive ones. In fact, it can benefit humans by raising standard behavioral performance to normal.

Such was the almost too-good-to-be-true news passed on to the American press last week at a Washington, D.C., press conference by three American scientists just returned from the Fourth International Caffeine Workshop in Athens, Greece. The scientists were P.B. Dews of Harvard Medical School in Boston, Alan Leviton of the Children's Hospital Medical Center in Boston and James G. Wilson of the Children's Hospital Research Foundation in Cincinnati. They said they were passing on the essence of recent medical literature and scientific results reported at the workshop, sponsored by the International Life Sciences Institute in Washington, a food and beverage industry-supported group. The workshop was attended by 100 caffeine investigators from various countries.

Specifically, Leviton pointed out that two recent human epidemiological studies attempting to link caffeine to low birth weight or birth defects such as cleft lip, cleft palate, missing fingers and missing toes had failed to do so (SN: 1/30/82, p. 68).

Although a study tying coffee consumption to human pancreatic cancer (SN: 3/21/81, p. 181) was "interesting," Leviton said, other scientists had raised questions about it (SN: 7/4/81, p. 6), and still others are now attempting to replicate its findings and do not seem able to do so. A 1972 study associating caffeine consumption with heart attacks has not been replicated, he added. As for several recent studies attempting to connect caffeine with fibrocystic breast disease in women, he said, they too have produced negative results.

As Dews pointed out, studies of caf-

feine's effects on children, especially on hyperactive children, have shown no significant behavioral changes. "Children," he said, "appear to be less, and certainly no more, sensitive to measured effects of caffeine than adults. ..." He added that studies have shown that caffeine can restore humans' below-par performances caused by fatigue or boredom. Caffeine appears to be "quite safe within limits of normal consumption," he concluded.

However, not all people attending the press conference swallowed the good news. Michael F. Jacobson, executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, an environmental consumer group headquartered in Washington, charged that "the International Life Sciences Institute press conference on caffeine is yet another attempt by the food industry to confuse the public about a questionable food ingredient. ILSI was formed several years ago by coffee, soft drink and other processed food manufacturers and has led the forces defending caffeine. ..." While it is true that most of ILSI's funds come from industry, Dews replied, ILSI gives grants to reputable scientists from reputable institutions, and it is doubtful that any of these researchers would let ILSI funding influence their findings. What's more, Dews said, only half the scientists at the workshop in Athens had any connection with ILSI, and neither he, Leviton, nor Wilson had at the moment any grant money from ILSI.

Yet these comments in turn prompted a reporter to ask if only good news about caffeine emerged from the workshop. "Nothing raised a serious question," Dews answered. "We cannot manufacture bad news." But Wilson did point out that half a dozen papers presented confirmed what has been reported in the past about caffeine's ability to cause birth defects in rodents (SN: 3/8/80, p. 133). —*J.A. Treichel*