

The white badge of courage

Dr. Graeme Cunningham is uniquely qualified to help health professionals deal with addiction problems because he has travelled down the same road.

So startling was the impact of his battle against booze that he now devotes his professional life to helping others facing the same fight. Today, Cunningham is director of the Addiction Division at the Homewood Health Centre in Guelph, Ont. — home of the country's largest residential facility for addicted health professionals.

For years, no matter how miserable he felt, Cunningham put on his "badge of courage" — his lab coat — every day and went to work. One night he had a seizure because of alcohol withdrawal and was admitted to the intensive care unit. "When I woke up I had no idea how I got there, and I was director of the unit. I signed myself out, had a shower, came back and started doing rounds. No one said anything."

Cunningham says his battle with addiction had its roots in his childhood. "A number of us went into medicine to have our needs met in unhealthy ways. I grew up in a cold, distant home where there wasn't much affirmation unless I got A-plus. There was very little physical touching in terms of warmth and love but there was a very strong message to be the best you can be, be a man, be aggressive, play contact sports, the-world-will-be-yours-son kind of attitude."

Cunningham's father, a physician, was a severe alcoholic. He never received treatment, and the damage caused by his addiction eventually killed him. "He lost everything, including his licence to practise, which he gave up. By the time he was in his 50s his alcoholism was very advanced. My memories of growing up at home are not happy ones at all." Violence, public drunkenness, family secrets, lots of embarrassment — that is what Cunningham remembers about being a boy.

"What it did to me was diminish my sense of self-worth, my sense of individuality, my ability to appreciate and accept my strong points. If someone told me, 'You're doing well,' I didn't believe it. At the time, my insides felt rotten."

Cunningham found his solution in a bottle of Scotch whisky. "I remember my first drink like it was yesterday," he says. "It was a magic elixir."

He continued drinking throughout his schooling, and alcohol moved with him into his practice. "During this time I was always drinking to drunkenness. I never drank socially. I took cocaine, I took prescription drugs to keep my feelings on a normal keel.

"I felt I was a fraud. The more letters I added after my name, the less I believed I deserved them.

"They describe the alcoholic as an egomaniac with an inferiority complex and that fits me to a T. What you would see if you had known me in those days was an arrogant, overbearing doctor, but I felt that I was worthless.

"The reality now is that I'm pretty good at what I do. I make mistakes and I'm the same as everyone else, no better or no worse, but it has taken a long time to get to this realization. Back then I had a little voice that said: 'If you only knew what a scum bag I was you'd never speak to me again.' I really believed that voice. Now, it's gone away."

After a horrendous scare early in 1986, Cunningham and his second wife, Linda, telephoned a 12-step program, and that marked the start of his sobriety. He has been medical director at the 82-bed Homewood since 1989.

Cunningham says the art of treating addiction lies in maintaining the motivation because when the physical hurt ends, the head starts to say that maybe it wasn't so bad after all. "That's what I call

my moment of clarity. The core of being addicted is isolation. The treatment is people. So what I basically do as a therapist is get addicts living with people again."

What's needed is the wisdom of people who are living sober, Cunningham believes. He says addicted doctors have to get off their pedestals and realize there are men and women — nonphysicians — who can be of tremendous help to them.

Cunningham, who sits on the council of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario, remembers a doctor telling him to "give me a call" when he was ready to get better. He listened, and now he's the one waiting for the calls. — Ken Kilpatrick, Hamilton



Courtesy Graeme Cunningham

Cunningham: "I remember my first drink like it was yesterday."