

## The Seed: Reforming Drug Abusers with Love

*As Science was going to press it was learned that Art Barker, founder of The Seed drug rehabilitation program discussed below, has just announced that his program in Dade County, Florida, will be closed and the young people enrolled in it taken into the program at nearby Fort Lauderdale. He is thereby protesting the county's decision that The Seed, because its state license has only recently been issued, is not yet eligible for certain federal funds. Some people in drug abuse prevention work in Dade suspect that Barker's departure is a bargaining gambit and that he will be back.—EDITOR*

A drug abuse rehabilitation program, based on what its proponents call a philosophy of love, has become the focus of a bitter contest in Florida. Called "The Seed," it attempts to rescue young drug users by changing their attitudes toward drugs and the environment they represent through a process of psychological reconditioning. The program's director and founder is Art Barker, a former night club comedian and recovered alcoholic who claims 16 years of interest in drug abuse prevention. The Seed's many, and influential, supporters believe it has been the salvation of more than 3000 teenagers. Its detractors charge that it may actually have harmed a number of those it set out to save.

Such controversy is not uncommon in the drug abuse prevention field, but it usually subsides after an initial flurry of publicity, leaving drug programs to succeed or fail on their merits. The Fort Lauderdale Seed—the original center—has been licensed by the state and has passed an evaluation by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) which supports it in part because it is considered an innovative program. Nevertheless, in this case, the furor over the program has led Florida Governor Rubin Askew to appoint a special committee to look into the controversy.

There are those who believe that Barker has used his politically influential supporters to neutralize the state and local regulatory apparatus. Clients and their parents report that he has told them not to talk to the press. Professionals from other drug abuse programs say he has refused them entry into his centers. Thus, he has maintained relative secrecy about many aspects of his operations. Even the state drug abuse office's own regulations, which prohibit dissemination of basic information about drug abuse treatment centers—such as budget, staff and board

of directors membership—aid Barker in avoiding public accountability.

Last April, the board of directors of the Dade County Health Planning Council (HPC) met to decide what advice to give the state about licensing a new Seed branch in Miami. As the board met publicly to discuss the pros and cons of the issue, some 500 "Seedlings," past and present participants of the program, sat outside singing the Seed song to a modified version of "Greensleeves": "The Seed, the Seed is all we need to stay off the junk and the pills and the weed . . ." while awaiting the outcome of the proceedings.

Previously, the Health Planning Council's drug abuse task force had adamantly advised against licensure of the Seed but the board of directors—overwhelmingly and for the first time—rejected the task force's advice. The directors recommended that the Dade County Seed be granted a conditional license provided that it take steps to correct within 6 months "areas of concern" cited by the task force. Several task force members, including the chairman, stated publicly that they were subjected to "pressure from Tallahassee" to advise licensure of the Seed. Partially because of the political pressure, the task force did the opposite.

Whether it rehabilitates real drug addicts or not—an issue which is central to the controversy—the Seed apparently does make problem teenagers abandon the outward signs of rebellion against adult society. After graduating from the Seed, kids give their parents less trouble than they did before. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Seed counts among its most ardent supporters some of Florida's most respected citizens, including state legislators, judges, doctors, the chairman of Broward County School Board and the lieutenant governor—all of whom are represented on the Seed's own board.

Many of them have children or relatives who graduated from the Seed.

The first Seed opened in Fort Lauderdale in Broward County in 1970. Since then, Seeds have appeared in Fort Pierce, St. Petersburg and Miami. Barker predicts that the Seed, Inc., will spread to more than 28 states. The Fort Lauderdale center is funded primarily by an annual \$230,000 grant from NIMH and a \$35,000 grant from the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA). Barker has applied for federal money to support his other centers but so far has only state and community funding for them.

Barker, the guiding light and charismatic leader of the program, bases his treatment concept on peer pressure and a philosophy of love. His goal is the total reconstruction of the young "druggie," or drug abuser. In recent testimony before a House education subcommittee, Barker described the transformation his program achieves: "A kid being totally off drugs, his whole attitude toward life being changed, he loves himself, he loves others, loves God, loves country, is totally honest and aware." He claims the Seed has a 90 percent success rate, the most successful in the nation. He further claims that the Seed is the "most economical program in the world," with a per client treatment cost of \$250. "Picture in your mind a moment," Barker testified, "\$250 saves one young person from a life of drugs with one of three alternatives—death, imprisonment, or psychiatric hospitalization. What an investment—\$250 for one life!"

Seedlings range in age from 9 to 30, though nearly 70 percent are 17 or younger. Every day, staff members with microphones conduct continuous "rap" sessions attended by an average of 500 Seedlings. During this initial stage, Seedlings live in foster homes in the area provided by families whose children are enrolled in a later phase of the program. Following completion of the first phase which can last weeks, a child may be permitted to return to school, a job, and his own home. But he still is required to attend periodic evening rap sessions. Parents' only contact with their children during the first phase takes place at public evening meetings twice a week. There, Seedlings, in revival style, are called upon to describe before the entire audience their paths to drug abuse and their progress, if any, towards overcoming the problem. Each emotional confession usually ends with the seemingly pro forma Seed sign-off, "I love you,

Mom and Dad; I love you, group."

Not long ago, Florida Democrat Claude Pepper took his subcommittee on crime on a tour of the Seed and labeled it "one of the most imaginative, innovative, and dynamic programs" he had seen. Many in the drug abuse field in Florida, however, do not share Pepper's enthusiasm. As the Seed has expanded, opposition to the program and its flamboyant director has grown and become more bitter.

Members of the Dade County Health Planning Council's drug abuse task force who wanted to see the Seed denied a license express deep-seated philosophical objections to Barker's program. Opposition was also expressed by Dr. Ben Shepphard, the "grandfather" of Florida's drug rehabilitation programs, and formerly a consulting physician at the Seed. He now believes the program is dangerous because it relies on "brainwashing," and should be closed. In his view, half of the applicants accepted by the Seed would not be admitted by legitimate treatment centers. According to a state drug abuse office survey 17 percent of the Seedlings have never used drugs of any kind, and were admitted for resolution of "attitudinal" problems—relationship difficulties, school adaptation problems, and a life style objectionable to parents. At least one professional in the White House's Special Action Office for Drug Abuse Prevention is concerned, as is Shepphard, about what he terms the "hypocrisy" of using funds aimed at helping drug abusers to straighten out young people who give their parents problems. Unlike other programs, the Seed accepts young adults brought to it involuntarily by their parents. According to the Seed's own statistics, about two-thirds of the clients come in through private referrals; about half of the clients have never been arrested. "Parents bring their kids to Barker," commented Steve Greenberg, a young lawyer involved in a voluntary service that helps troubled adolescents, "because they want a simple solution. They can't communicate with their kids, and blame it on drugs, lack of law and order, permissiveness—any easy answer."

Shepphard and other professionals fear that confrontation therapy and "peer pressure group interaction" as practiced by the Seed may have long-term ill effects on clients. Peer pressure, in which a participant's psychological defenses are broken down and dependency upon the support of the group is established, is widely and successfully

used by many drug programs. In those centers, however, it is usually accomplished in small groups of 10 to 15 persons under the supervision of trained personnel. The Seed uses groups of 300 to 500, without professional leadership. Many question whether this kind of peer pressure can accelerate, emphasize, or mask a severe emotional disturbance, and whether the transfer of the source of decision-making from the individual to the peer group is desirable.

Some fear that those whom Barker calls "successes" may, in fact, have more serious problems than they did as drug experimenters. Helene Kloth, a guidance counselor at a Dade County high school, gave the following account of the "clockwork orange" behavior of Seedlings who return to school: "When they return, they are 'straight,' namely, quiet, well-dressed, short hair, and not under the influence of drugs compared to their previous appearance of stoned most of the time. However, they seem to be living in a robot-like atmosphere, they won't speak to anyone outside of their own group. They sit in class together and the classes become divided into Seedlings opposing non-Seedlings . . . and the classes and the student body are as though divided into two camps. Seedlings seem to have an informing system on each other and on others. . . . They run in to use the telephone daily, to report against each other to the Seed, and it seems that an accused Seedling has no chance to defend himself because if enough persons accuse him of something, he is presumed guilty. . . . I used to think it was the saving program, I used to take

kids there. . . . I am not sure whether the method in which they do return home and the difficulties they have in school is an improvement over their previous condition of being on drugs."

Dr. Jeffrey Elenewski, a task force member and clinical psychologist who interviews and evaluates young drug abusers in the court system, claims that he hears every day of incidents in which children have been "mistreated, threatened, and have suffered ill consequences pursuant to their involvement in the Seed program." Elenewski estimates that he has seen about 200 former Seed clients in the last 3 years, adolescents for whom the Seed has been psychologically destructive. "I see Barker's failures," says Elenewski, "the children who have attempted suicide after running from the Seed, those who are overwhelmed by feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, and despair."

Barker's original center began in an old circus tent. At first, he had 80 clients. But since that modest beginning, he has moved to his present more expansive quarters—a 23-acre estate in a Fort Lauderdale suburb where, according to one Seed supporter, a \$1 million building program is under way.

As it stands today, Seed headquarters is not unlike a fortress. A high fence surrounds the dowdy buildings. Outside, young male Seedlings stand guard, checking the identifications and purposes of all those who wish to be admitted to the grounds.

Within this sanctuary, Barker himself is as protective of the Seed's image and reputation as the Seedlings are of physical plant. During an interview with this reporter, Barker showed two

## Abelson Awarded Kalinga Prize

Philip H. Abelson, editor of *Science* and president of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, is a winner of UNESCO's Kalinga Prize for the Popularization of Science for 1972. He shares the award with Nigel Calder, British science writer and editor.

Abelson, 60, obtained his doctorate in physics from the University of California at Berkeley in 1939. He has been associated almost continuously with the Carnegie Institution since then, doing research on chemistry, geophysics, and biophysics. During World War II he worked at the Naval Research Laboratory on the separation of uranium isotopes.

Abelson was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1959 and became editor of *Science* in 1962.

The Kalinga Prize, established in 1951, is awarded yearly to someone considered to have made international contributions to the interpretation of science. It is accompanied by £1000 and a month-long trip to India.—C.H.

sides. At first, he was warm and cordial, apparently pleased with the opportunity to talk about his program. But the atmosphere of friendly cooperation rapidly disintegrated the moment the Seed chief learned that he was not the only person to whom we would speak. The realization that Seed opponents were also being interviewed so distressed him that cooperation came abruptly to a halt.

The Seed's opponents are pessimistic about their chances of stopping Barker or making him more accountable to and cooperative with the rest of the state rehabilitation system.

The decision last April by the Dade County HPC to advise conditional licensing marked the culmination of a bitter fight. For 3 years, Florida state law has required annual state licensing of all drug treatment programs and about 125 have been approved. Although several treatment centers have been closed, according to Frank Nelson, director of the State Drug Abuse Program, officials generally work with applicants to upgrade the quality of services rendered to keep the centers open. State officials view the licensing process as the keystone to unification and coordination of state and local anti-drug abuse efforts.

In Dade County, the drug abuse task force has performed review and advisory studies prior to state action on all county license applicants for the past year. The task force and the HPC board of directors are composed of a broad spectrum of county citizens, many of whom have no particular background or vested interest in the drug abuse field. In recommending, after a 3-month study, that the state not license Barker's venture in Miami, the HPC task force had concluded that "the program does not comply with local and state drug abuse guidelines."

The task force cited many of the criticisms made by the NIMH evaluation and review team, which conducted two site visits to the Fort Lauderdale Seed in Broward County. A major concern expressed by both groups, and by a HPC special report\* on the Seed, issued in 1972, involves the size and qualifications of the Seed's staff. Barker is president of the Seed's board, executive director, and program director. His wife, Shelley, is on the five-member policy board, and is also employed by

the corporation. The Seed's staff consists mainly of graduated Seedlings, whose major qualification appears to be successful completion of the program. "With the exception of one paraprofessional who attended a short course in drug rehabilitation," states the task force report, "no one on the staff has had formal training in drug rehabilitation or counseling. . . . There is no documentation about the availability of professional backup for intake assistance, evaluations, medical care, or assistance in crisis situations—availability of these in both immediacy and adequate quantity."

The Seed employs the services of only one psychiatrist, who claims to screen all Broward County incoming clients. Screening for emotionally or psychologically disturbed children in Miami and other centers is left mainly to the professionally untrained staff.

The task force and others have challenged Barker's claim that his program has a 90 percent "cure" rate. The state survey concluded that only about 40 percent of Seed clients on record even finished the program. Moreover, the state office cited a paucity of follow-up material that would establish the number of Seedlings who remained "straight" after completing the program. "This claim of success," states the task force report, "has been established as patently false, and continuance of the proclamation raises a question of the program's credibility and integrity." In addition, drug abuse professionals argue that since only 1 percent of Barker's clients are primarily heroin users, the Seed's success rates cannot be compared fairly with those of programs which primarily treat heroin addicts.

Barker's cost estimates have also been questioned. The county task force report indicates that parents estimate the true cost not at \$250, as Barker claims, but at close to \$1,500, if one includes the services parents provide, such as extensive transportation to the Seed several times per day, massive food preparation assigned or suggested by the Seed, contributions made when the hat is passed around at open meetings, and the added family cost of maintaining a foster home for several Seedlings during their first phase.

Barker's claims of high success and low cost are especially irritating to directors of other Dade and Broward County drug programs. While program leaders acknowledge that they have received increased state and federal support, many indicate that their centers

have lost community fiscal and voluntary aid.

More generally, drug abuse professionals complain vehemently about Barker's lack of cooperation with, and total disdain for, other drug treatment programs. Barker, however, has insisted publicly that he does refer clients to other clinics and does cooperate with other centers. Dr. Tom Carroll, director of the Dade County's Comprehensive Drug Program, flatly disagrees. "He has developed his own system," said Carroll in an interview, "we want him to become part of ours." Carroll's observation is supported by the myriad of study reports on the Seed. All but one cite a failure to cooperate with other programs.

Barker, for example, is not participating in the new Comprehensive Drug Program which just received a \$3 million NIMH grant to coordinate existing treatment programs in the county. The cornerstone of this new program is the central intake and referral service, which will evaluate drug abusers and place them in the program it finds best suited to their needs.

Barker has charged that the task force is composed of "biased individuals" involved in other drug programs, but 12 of the 18-member group have no connection whatsoever with other centers. He has also claimed that the controversy is limited to Dade County and that the press is creating the debate, but, in fact, there is also controversy in St. Petersburg, where complaints about the Seed have been made to the American Civil Liberties Union.

The state drug abuse office granted Barker an unconditional license to operate at least a year, but the bitter fight has led Governor Askew to appoint a special subcommittee of the State Drug Abuse Advisory Council to study the procedures and requirements involved in obtaining a license to determine whether there was any prejudice in the handling of the Seed case. The special committee is well into its investigation. This report could very well influence subsequent NIMH evaluations and support.

Meanwhile, even as the investigation is under way, Barker is jetting from Dallas to Atlanta, promoting his program of "saving kids lives."

—JUDITH MILLER

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\* The HPC special report advised that the Seed be encouraged to operate in Dade County, provided Barker move to correct many of the program's deficiencies.