Working in the wet clinic with street drinkers

Wet clinics, (staffed by a mental health support worker, outreach worker and trained volunteers, together with a doctor and nurse), are for people with severe alcohol dependence who have failed to engage with treatment elsewhere and are drinking on the streets. They are allowed to bring their alcohol into the clinic with them, hence the name "wet" clinic. We connect with people as they are now, rather than expecting behaviour change before relationship.

Through my work with homeless people and street drinkers I have found that all the knowledge I gained in medical school, and all the up to date guidelines and targets, and even the best applied patient-centred consultation technique all fall short. There is only one way to reach where people are deeply trapped. What makes the difference is to be authentic and whole-hearted. It is not about what I do or say or the knowledge I apply, but about who I am and the character I that react from that makes the difference.

What impacts people, and creates change in their lives, is this:

- To be patient and kind.
- To avoid simply trying to copy the way someone else does things, or to believe others should do things my way and imagine that I know best.
- To treat people with dignity, and focus on their needs and agenda rather than my own.
- To avoid getting drawn into being angry or offended when people behave unacceptably, and to accept, or reject, people on the basis of how they are behaving today rather than how they behaved last time.
- To refuse to be drawn into the power and manipulation games people may play, and instead to look for where I can see truth or love being demonstrated, and to highlight and encourage these.
- To be alert to risk and take steps to protect myself, colleagues and clients from harm wherever reasonable.
- To always trust that the person I am dealing with is telling the truth unless I have reasonable evidence that this is not so, in which case to seek to bring to light deception and to explore the reasons underlying this.
- To continue to hope that change to a less destructive lifestyle is both possible and achievable with help.
- To transmit that hope to clients and colleagues.
- To persevere with working towards such change.
- To keep believing change is possible, no matter what the set-backs.

What I have written isn't anything new; the ideas are at least 2,000 years old, described by the apostle Paul in a letter to people in Corinth. Sometimes the ancient ways are the good ways.

1 Corinthians 13 *4 Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or conceited or proud; 5 love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs; 6 love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth. 7 Love never gives up; and its faith, hope, and patience never fail. 8 Love is eternal.*

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