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Experts Have Both Praise, Cautions

BY SUE McDONALD
Enquirer Reporter

Ever since Straight Inc. formed as a teen-age drug rehabilitation program in Florida in 1976, it has had more than its share of critics.

It has been labeled a brainwashing organization that coerces teen-agers to sign up for drug rehabilitation, takes away their rights and forces them to adopt new thought patterns.

Not so, says a husband-wife team that specializes in studying group psychology, brainwashing and cults and has examined Straight.

Andrew and Barbara Malcolm, Canadian researchers, have written about brainwashing in their book *Tyranny of the Group*.

In August, 1981, Straight's directors hired the Malcolms to study the program and answer basic questions about the Straight philosophy and technique.

DOES STRAIGHT brainwash kids? Is it a cult? Does it have a religious overtone? Are teens' constitutional rights violated?

In a 31-page report, the Malcolm's cleared Straight of all those charges but recommended several areas for improvement and safeguards. They labeled Straight a "phenomenal" program that accomplishes what it intends.

"We have been involved in drug programs, we have seen far more of them and we have read about

most of them," they wrote. "But we have never seen a program that seemed so intelligently designed to bring about success in this very difficult field."

Straight is an intensive program that involves an entire family in rehabilitating teen-age drug abusers. It operates on the philosophy that just as peer pressure got teens involved in drug abuse, peer pressure will get them off drugs.

The average client spends about 11 months in the program.

IN THE early stages, lasting several weeks, "newcomer" teens stay in foster homes at night. During the day, at Straight, they are led around by their belt loops by "oldcomer" teens as a sign that their ability to make judgments has been impaired by drug use.

Within a few weeks, through self-confession, honesty and counseling that resembles the Alcoholics Anonymous approach, teens earn responsibilities and privileges, such as the right to participate in programs, to return home and to leave Straight and go to school or work.

They are persuaded by other teens who have gone through the program to eliminate drug-using habits and adopt a drug-free lifestyle.

Many of those techniques, to outsiders, might seem cruel, and the directors of Straight asked the Malcolms to judge the program and answer those charges.

The Malcolms outlined several conditions that

are necessary for the existence of brainwashing, and found that Straight met only one of those conditions: "for as brief a time as possible."

THAT WAS isolating a subject from an accustomed environment and providing constant surveillance.

"The adolescent is taken out of his home and school and spends 12 of his hours at Straight and the other 12 at a foster home. He is never alone," they wrote. "We may deplore this practice, but if we are to be entirely practical, we must recognize that this is the only way to establish a drug-free environment and such an environment is (necessary) for recovery from drug dependence in virtually every case."

On other points, the Malcolms said brainwashing does not exist at Straight.

"No such devices, from the threat of torture to the use of mechanical constraints or solitary confinement are used at Straight.

"Peer pressure is, of course, tremendously powerful, and this is a constant element in the program they added. "But this potent instrument is not, in our opinion, abused in any way."

THE MALCOLMS cautioned, however, that the practice of leading newcomers by their belt loops "held within it the seed of much abuse and Straight would be well advised to watch it carefully."

The Malcolms also said Straight is not a cult-like program that coerces participants into joining.

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The Malcolms also said Straight is not a cult-like program that coerces participants into joining.

"Its stated goal is not any perpetual attachment to Straight, but a gradual return to full and produc- tive membership in general society," they said. In addition, its non-profit status removes any possibility for personal gain that is commonplace among other cult leaders who ask members to turn over all their personal belongings.

Teens in the Straight program are not forced to adopt new styles of thought and thought patterns, but instead are asked to revive the patterns of behav- ior they exhibited before they turned to drugs, the re- searchers said.

They also pointed out that newcomers have the option of leaving the program after the first 14 days— an outlet that answers criticism of clients being held against their will.

ALTHOUGH THEY said many entrants initially are hesitant to give up their drug habits, "it seems to us that it is a gross perversion of the human impulse to hold that their civil right to ruin themselves as adolescents should be honored over their distressed parents' rights to insist that they be given a decent opportunity to live full and happy lives for many years to come."

The Malcolms recommended that Straight con- tinue a self-examination to ensure the potentially dangerous elements of group therapy, the belt-loop technique and leadership stay free of abuse.