

Book Review

'The Knotted Cord'. Transgenerational Alcohol Related Neurodevelopmental Disorder (ARND)

Author: Kieran D. O'Malley (Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist, Charlemont Clinic, Dublin, Ireland)

I approached Dr. Kieran O'Malley's book as a layperson, without any medical or scientific background. I live in a country which for decades has struggled with one of the highest alcohol consumptions in the world (Estonia) and yet I haven't met a single person in my country who was diagnosed with FAS. My interest in alcohol related birth defects is derived from the wider alcohol regulation aspect and from understanding and defining the substance as such. Alcohol's teratogenic effect is definitely one of the most important fact that will change the way western cultures will look at alcohol and alcohol policy in decades to come.

Dr. O'Malley's book is an important addition to this development. The book's focus on transgenerational aspect gives another important argument for a comprehensive alcohol policy. *The Knotted Cord* shows clearly that prenatal alcohol exposure is so often a result of a broken system – a country that have ignored a need for public health oriented regulation and a family background where alcohol has played an important role for many generations.

The chapter "Ireland's Toxic Romance with Alcohol" has a crucial importance explaining the context where children are born and at the same time it have me as a reader a good position to draw so many parallels to my own country's situation. And I believe the similarities are familiar to more than one country in Europe.

As Dr. O'Malley describes it: "Through generations, alcohol has coloured family gatherings and rituals from birth, christenings, first communions, confirmations, weddings, funerals. It is as if there is a drink for every occasion and a story and a song in your heart to boot!" Through a masterful marketing practices of the alcohol industry we now associate both sport and cultural events also with alcohol. Industry says that alcohol has always been a part of our cultures and we have drunk alcohol for thousands of years. But we have known alcohol's teratogenicity only for the last 40 and its carcinogenicity last 30 years. As Dr O'Malley so well explains, these cultural habits are strongly embedded into our societies and results are unfortunately devastating.

It is a difficult reading, for a person with no medical background, but it acts also as a studybook that will require you to return to different passages and chapters and equips one for advocacy as well. I have experienced that already myself.

The biggest value of the "*Knotted Cord*" is focusing on the Alcohol Related Neurodevelopmental Disorder and especially on its non-dysmorphic side. As the book also so well explains, the dysmorphic part of that harm – fetal alcohol syndrome – is already much more recognized. But the hidden part is too often ignored. Children who are harmed that way are misunderstood and viewed as a problem themselves. As the latest estimates are showing the true prevalence of FASD is around 5% of the population, that really speaks how big this issue is and that it is in fact a part of the industrial epidemics that we are facing.

I found it very important that Dr. O'Malley not only explained the theoretical part of the problem but also brought examples showing the real situations these children and families are in. Through these cases he showed the importance of diagnosis and specialized help that can follow. "Does it cure the child?" Dr. O'Malley asks. "No, but it offers the opportunity to begin new conversations and actually bring the child and his/her developmental psychiatric problems to the table for a more studied evaluation."

"The Knotted Cord" is an important addition to the library covering alcohol related harm and is a valuable source for everyone who wants and who needs to know more about the topic.

Lauri Beekmann

Secretary General of NordAN (Nordic Alcohol and Drug Policy Network)