Cajun Culture
Nurturees Drinking

NEW IBERIA (AP) - South Louisiana's Cajun culture may nurture unusually high alcohol and drug consumption, but an expert feels strong Acadian family ties help cure many who get hooked.

"It's a cultural thing," said Vern Ridgeway, treatment director of the Adolescent Chemical Dependency Clinic at Baton Rouge General Hospital. "We probably could put 80 percent of the people in south Louisiana in treatment (for alcohol abuse). Beer is the number one drink and hard liquor is second," Ridgeway told a Tuesday seminar for nurses from Dauterive Hospital and area school personnel.

"It's not uncommon here for people to be introduced to drinking beer as a toddler. Some of the kids we see at the substance abuse clinic cannot remember their first taste of alcohol."

Ridgeway said nearby Lafayette has the third highest per capita beer consumption rate in the nation and the alcohol consumption throughout Acadiana is higher than average.

Because drinking is part of Cajun celebrations such as festivals and Mardi Gras, people in south Louisiana think it's only natural to drink alcoholic beverages, Ridgeway said.

And children who see their parents, grandparents and other relatives get drunk on festive occasions are likely to misuse alcohol or even drugs themselves, he said.

But the same Cajuns who use alcohol to celebrate and to drown their sorrows also have a tradition of close family ties that makes it easier for a drug or alcohol addict to recover, he said.

"Probably the best deterrent to chemical dependency is an open relationship with family members. Unfortunately, in most places the family unit is becoming weaker instead of stronger.

"But in south Louisiana, especially among those with the Acadian heritage, the strong feelings of family remain. That helps recovery." He said he does not believe scare tactics discourage a child from trying drugs. He said he thinks describing drugs and their effects might actually make a child curious to experiment with drugs.

"What we need to do is let kids know there are alternative ways to get good feelings and to deal with stress and pain. At the center, we encourage them to talk about their feelings, to be open and honest."

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