

Through a series of inexpensive or cost-free steps each building on the other, researchers at the US Salem Veterans Affairs medical centre have transformed a poor **aftercare attendance** record into an excellent one. The centre offers a 28-day intensive rehabilitation programme run on cognitive-behavioural lines to its mainly alcohol-dependent patients. Attendance at weekly aftercare groups is encouraged but was poor. **At first** the centre tried inviting patients coming to the end of their stays to choose an aftercare group and arranged brief meetings with the group leader who explained the importance of attending and answered queries.<sup>1</sup> Patients then signed a contract to attend in which they recognised that doing so would triple their chances of staying sober. This raised the proportion initiating aftercare from 40% to 70% and doubled the sessions attended to three out of eight.

**Next** was added mailed and phoned reminders to attend and fulfill the contract, and encouragement from the group leader to clients who missed a session.<sup>2</sup> Aftercare initiation was raised from 70% to 100%, sessions attended doubled to over four, and the need for hospital readmissions was cut by two thirds. **To this was added** greetings and congratulations from the aftercare therapist to attending patients and publicly displayed certificates and medals for good attenders.<sup>3</sup> Now attendance rose from four to on average nearly six of the first eight sessions. A subsample of these patients were interviewed six months after treatment. This **latest study** confirmed that patients who had received the full intervention had stayed three months longer in aftercare. It also found that 76% were abstinent compared to 40% of the control group and that they suffered fewer alcohol-related problems.<sup>4</sup>

1 Lash S.J. "Increasing participation in substance abuse aftercare treatment." *American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse*: 1998, 24(1), p. 31–36.

2 Lash S.J. et al. "Increasing adherence to substance abuse aftercare group therapy." *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*: 1999, 16(1), p. 55–60.

3 Lash S.J. et al. "Social reinforcement of substance abuse aftercare group attendance." *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*: 2001, 20, p. 3–8.

4 Lash S.J. et al. "Social reinforcement of substance abuse treatment aftercare participation: impact on outcome." *Addictive Behaviors*: 2004, 29(2), p. 337–342.