

Ian MacEwen may be dead but his influence will live for years

"I HAVE BEEN an alcoholic for the past 10 years."

The first admission — the biggest step on a long hard road to recovery.

It is heard every week by more than 2000 alcoholics in an estimated 140 groups around the country.

It is made easier by the bonds of friendship, support and anonymity that epitomise the Alcoholics Anonymous organisation.

NEGLECT

When Ian MacEwen made his first admission, from a psychiatric hospital in Nelson, he had none of this backing.

It was 1946 and he had been living with his mother-in-law, wife and family of four boys in Richmond. A few months earlier they had had to leave their small farm because of neglect and poor management.

It had been the story of



Ian MacEwen

most of the things he had been connected with for some years. He had been a chronic alcoholic for at least 10 years and the family situation was strained and difficult.

There had been many attempts by a desperate family to sober him up and stop his binges of drunkenness.

He had been committed to The Island, a home run by the Salvation Army in Auckland.

In 1938 he had been treated in England by injection at the Institute of Endocrinology and had had many interviews with a neurologist without producing any permanent results.

On his return to New Zealand he had been committed to an inebriates' home for 12 months — a few months after leaving he was back in the same habits again.

OUTBREAK

He lost a good job in Auckland as manager of the family firm and a nice home which had to be sold with all its contents to meet debts.

After a typical beer-drinking outbreak on Saturday he admitted himself to Ngawhata Psychiatric Hospital in Nelson where he was sobered up and nursed through several severe periods of depression.

The turning point for Ian

JO CALLANAN writes about a man who did much for alcoholics

MacEwen came when he picked up a copy of "Readers Digest" in the hospital reading room one day and read an article by a reformed alcoholic.

LITERATURE

The man who had been told he was just a drunk for years and years discovered the term alcoholic and the disease concept of alcoholism.

He followed the author's recommendation and contacted the general service office of Alcoholics Anonymous in New York.

AA sent him some of their literature and by following their programme of recovery he was able to resist all temptations to go back to see how he was with drinking.

Alcoholics Anonymous stresses that no alcoholic ever gets back his ability to handle liquor again, and he came to accept this completely.

The MacEwen family moved out to a farm in Wakefield and he settled in to clean up the property and start the message passing around New Zealand that there was an answer for alcoholics.

As he was kept posted by the general service office of AA in New York, Ian travelled the country meeting other alcoholics and introducing

them to the methods he had found successful in regaining his sobriety.

Last year he told his story, virtually the history of AA in New Zealand, on tape and the transcript, along with those from other early members will be used to build up an archive.

He tells of being asked to address the Rotary Club in Auckland, the scene of his personal disaster.

He had gone from being a well-known member of the business community, in charge of a big business — to almost being the town drunk. However, to his surprise, the talk had a deep and very solid impact on the club.

The talks became almost a part of his rehabilitation and indicated, by the number of inquiries that came after each meeting, the need for AA in the community.

TREATMENT

Various people were using the AA methods — taking one day at a time — to help themselves, but there were no organised groups as such.

Ian tried to get one going in Nelson but was never successful. People would come to his farm but they were never able to start a meeting.

AA was introduced to

Queen Mary Hospital, Hanmer, with his help. He interested doctors and psychiatrists in AA and was instrumental in having alcoholics accepted for treatment in hospitals.

He founded the New Zealand general service conference in 1964 at a meeting at Massey University and from that time until his first stroke in 1972 ran the general service office in Wellington, building the services, producing literature and devoting himself to helping other alcoholics.

HISTORIC

Earlier this year at the general service conference, which he had formed 12 years earlier, Ian MacEwen delivered an address which has been described by those who attended as an historic event.

The 300 alcoholics present had expected a five-minute talk from one whom many thought was a sick old man.

He stood motionless for 15 minutes and delivered a vital, simple speech with such power that most present were moved to tears.

Ian MacEwen died at Hastings recently. He was 72.

He dedicated the last 80 years of his life to his own and hundreds of others' sobriety.

Because alcoholism affects not just the sufferers, but their families and friends, his work affected the lives of thousands of New Zealanders and will continue to do so after his death.