Prescription: sobriety; Tackling alcoholism with a drug is anathema to support groups, but it's only a matter of time before it becomes mainstream treatment, says Peter Aldhous

BYLINE: Peter Aldhous.

Peter Aldhous is the chief of New Scientist 's San Francisco bureau

SECTION: FEATURES; Feature; Pg. 40-43

LENGTH: 2440 words

IF YOU'RE hoping to find out about using pills to treat alcohol addiction, the Alcoholics Anonymous website is the wrong place to look. Search there for "medication" and the closest you'll come is a warning about the dangers of turning to prescription drugs or narcotics as a substitute for alcohol.

The website of the Betty Ford Center in Palm Springs, California, reveals little more. It does at least discuss one possible medication to treat alcoholism, but the drug is curtly dismissed. "Naltrexone is not a cure for alcoholism nor is it in any way a treatment," writes James West, the centre's former medical director. "The treatment of alcoholism involves a complete psychological, spiritual and emotional shift, whereby victims of the disease are released at the core of their being from the compulsion to drink."

Dig through the wealth of addiction support groups online and you'll come across two responses again and again - pharmacological treatments to alcohol addiction are either ignored, or they are actively rejected as a crutch that must be abandoned. "The dogma has been that you can't treat a chemical addiction with another chemical," says Markus Heilig of the US National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) in Bethesda, Maryland. "It's well-meaning but naive, and in the end very destructive."

That doctrine, however, is poised to crumble. Encouraged by advances in the neuroscience of addiction, positive results from clinical trials and stirrings of interest from big pharma, Heilig and his colleagues are pushing for medication to become a mainstream treatment. Today, the few drugs available to treat alcohol abuse are rarely used outside a small number of specialist centres, but NIAAA's vision is for more and better drugs to be prescribed routinely by psychiatrists and even family doctors.

If they are successful the result will be alcoholism's "Prozac moment" says Mark Willenbringe