
Commentary

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Random Drug Testing Protects Patients and Medical Personnel

A proposal to require physicians licensed in California to undergo random drug and alcohol tests may be on the ballot as part of a larger initiative in November 2014.ⁱ The Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc. supports the use of random drug and alcohol testing of all health care workers. When this population uses drugs of abuse, they put their patients directly at risk. While medical personnel may have to pass an initial drug test as part of the hiring process, they are not required by law to be randomly screened for drugs. Mandatory random employee drug testing is reserved for employees in “safety-sensitive” positions. Physicians in private practice are not employees and are therefore usually not drug tested at all. However, physicians and nurses are responsible for making critical decisions and taking actions that directly affect the health and well-being of the sick and injured. Shouldn’t these positions be considered safety-sensitive?

The United States military has used random testing since the early 1980s with little controversy and great success. Similarly, the US first implemented mandatory urine drug testing of safety-sensitive employees during the 1980s. Also subject to testing are the estimated 10 million Americans with commercial driver licenses under the auspices of the US Department of Transportation. Similar testing programs have been developed for the nuclear power industry. The twin goals of random drug and alcohol testing within these populations are to reinforce all prevention messages to discourage drug use, and when random tests are positive, to intervene to help the individual stop use and, if needed, obtain treatment.

Testing for drugs of abuse is commonly used in areas of pre-employment evaluations, healthcare (screening patients), and within the criminal justice system.

Generally, medical organizations oppose random testing of healthcare personnel as unnecessarily expensive and a violation of privacy; however, a few hospitals do drug test physicians, including most notably Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston.

It is somewhat surprising that medical personnel are not subject to random drug testing, particularly given the fact that this population receives the best care management for substance use disorders. Physicians, nurses, and other medical personnel with substance use problems are commonly referred to their physician health program (PHP). Upon referral to the PHP, individuals are evaluated for substance use disorders and comorbid medical and mental health problems. When a substance use disorder is identified, they are provided safe haven from the medical board and admitted to high quality treatment. Participants must abstain from the use of alcohol and other drugs for the duration of care management, for periods of five years or longer. Participants are subject to frequent random drug and alcohol tests and detection of use is met

with immediate consequences. Other elements of the PHP care management may include worksite monitors, close participation in the 12-step programs of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous or other peer-based recovery support. A national study of PHPs demonstrated that these programs produce the best long-term results for substance use disorders.

Only the physicians and other medical professionals in the PHPs and similar care management programs are subject to random drug and alcohol testing – most often only after serious consequences have resulted from their substance use.

Random testing not only reinforces the laws against illegal drug use, but it also identifies recent drug use quickly creating a strong deterrent against illegal drug use and alcohol use among individuals on which others' lives depend. Random testing of physicians and other health care personnel would save careers and families as well as protect patients. Random drug testing is a benefit to those tested and not a threat.

The Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc. (IBH) strongly supports random drug testing for all health care workers and encourages states, hospitals and private practices, to implement random drug testing procedures linked to interventions to help individuals stop their use and obtain treatment when needed.

For more information on IBH and its priority projects to reduce illegal drug use, visit www.ibhinc.org.

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ⁱ Nagourney, A. (2014, August 1). California asks: should doctors face drug tests? *The New York Times*, p. A1. Available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/02/us/california-asks-should-doctors-face-drug-tests.html>