

The High Point Pook

HPC strives to guide, educate, encourage, and support

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Beyond the Prescription...

As I'm sure everyone is aware of by now, High Point Clinic has once again changed drug screens from oral swabs back to urine drug screens. The whole issue of drug screens and what they represent has been a constant source of irritation to the entire staff and, I'm sure, to all of you as patients here at High Point as well. From the indignity of having someone watch you pee, to having a nasty cotton wad stuck in your mouth for 10 minutes, it has not been pleasant. Plus the fact that people will frequently receive exorbitant bills from the testing company, stressing them both emotionally and fiscally. It has been, to say the least, a trying process for all of us. But to step back from all of this, I feel it is important to understand certain basic concepts surrounding the use of drug screens in addiction treatment, and why we do them. Ultimately, the underlying concept is one of trust. And although trust is a simple word, the ramifications of this simple word are quite profound.

The whole screwed up premise of drug screens is that since drug addicts lie, we have to do a test to see if they are telling the truth. There is really nothing else in the practice of medicine that is comparable or as offensive. There is no other test in the practice of medicine that assumes the patient is lying to you and is designed to determine if a patient is lying. That is insane! Especially when you realize that it is the medical field itself that has forced people with this disease to lie in order to be taken seriously. If you are an addict seeking treatment, being in withdrawal isn't enough, you have to have some other disease like a broken bone to be treated. When I worked in the ER, we had one patient who would actually break his own finger to get pain medicine to treat his withdrawal and depression. If he had told the truth that he was in withdrawal, he wouldn't have gotten treatment. As I have explained to all of you on your first visit here, what this disease is is a form of severe, debilitating depression and deserves treatment. Without appropriate treatment, people will of necessity turn to self-medication, just like some diabetics obtain insulin illegally over the internet because they can't afford medical care. So the medical field has created this problem along with its own dysfunctional solution.

What would it be like if patients could just be honest? That is essentially the environment we try to foster here at High Point. There is really never a reason to keep secrets here. We are here to help, and will not discharge a patient simply for "failing" a drug screen. (Even that term is judgmental!) Instead, we look at an inappropriate drug screen as an indication that something is wrong. Like a patient running a fever. With most of our patients, if a drug screen is inappropriate, it's because something bad has happened, or the patient is under increased stress. Our job is to try to help you through these difficult times. That frequently involves extra services like counseling, Mindfulness Meditation, or SMART Recovery. While some people may perceive this as punitive, it is important to understand that learning improved coping skills is often better than simply increasing medication. It is like teaching a person to fish instead of just giving them a fish. It may be a little harder initially, but the long-term benefits are much greater.

So the reasons we encounter here at the clinic for people not being extremely truthful are 1) because that is how people have been taught to behave based on previous experiences with health care providers, or 2) to avoid additional trips to the clinic. I get it. It can be a pain getting a ride, traveling long distances to get here, getting a babysitter, etc. But we can only do so much. We can't do your recovery for you. We work hard for you, and all we ask is that you work as hard for yourself as we do! But we cannot make any progress if there isn't truth and trust. In AA they have a saying, "We are only as sick as our secrets." I have been doing this for a very long time, and one thing I know for sure, you cannot make progress if you are not honest. We all truly care about everyone in this practice, and we truly want what's best for you, but you absolutely must be honest and truthful with us if we are to be able to help you achieve your goals. You all know we are not here to judge you, we are here to help you.

Back to the issue of drug screens, I truly wish we didn't have to use drug screens at all. But state regulations and reality dictate that we must. Honestly, we all know that if you really want to fake a drug screen, you can. I've even heard of people emptying their bladder, putting in a catheter and putting someone else's urine back in their bladder—all to pass a drug screen!! (Also if you've never heard of the Whizzinator, you might want to check it out but not while your kids are watching.) In short, it's not our job to be the pee police, our job is to help you, and if you really don't want help, please go somewhere else. We all know there are plenty of clinics where you can simply exchange a \$100 bill for a prescription. We all work very hard here at High Point to try to help people and we don't want to waste that effort on someone who isn't really interested in putting in the work themselves. Plus the fact that people who aren't interested in doing better just drag everyone else down. We just don't need that. So again, please just be honest with us, bear with us as we make adjustments to our new way of doing drug screens, and above all, keep up the good work!

- Vance Shaw, MD, FASAM

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