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Setting the Standard for Recovery: Physician Health Programs

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Abstract

A sample of 904 physicians consecutively admitted to 16 state Physicians' Health Programs (PHPs) was studied for 5 years or longer to characterize the outcomes of this episode of care and to explore the elements of these programs that could improve the care of other addicted populations. The study consisted of two phases: the first characterized the PHPs and their system of care management, while the second described the outcomes of the study sample as revealed in the PHP records. The programs were abstinence-based, requiring physicians to abstain from any use of alcohol or other drugs of abuse as assessed by frequent random tests typically lasting for 5 years. Tests rapidly identified any return to substance use, leading to swift and significant consequences. Remarkably, 78% of participants had no positive test for either alcohol or drugs over the 5-year period of intensive monitoring. At post-treatment follow-up 72% of the physicians were continuing to practice medicine. The unique PHP care management included close linkages to the 12-step programs of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous and the use of residential and outpatient treatment programs that were selected for their excellence.