Periodic Survey # 31
Practices and Attitudes Toward Adolescent Drug Screening

Periodic Survey #31 was initiated by the Committee on Substance Abuse (COSA) to explore pediatricians’ current practices and attitudes toward drug screening of adolescent patients. PS#33 was an eight-page self-administered questionnaire sent to a random sample of 1,636 active FAAPs. The original and four follow-up mailings were conducted from July to November 1995. We received a total of 1,099 completed questionnaires for a response of 67.2%. The drug screening questions were addressed to the 86% of respondents who provide direct patient care to adolescents 12 years of age and older (n=940).

During the past year, 60% of pediatricians have diagnosed and/or treated adolescent patients age 12 through 17 years for abuse of one or more substances.

- Less than one-half of pediatricians (45%) say they routinely ask their adolescent patients about alcohol or drug use; another 50% ask some patients. Few pediatricians (5%) routinely use a written questionnaire to inquire about adolescents’ substance use, although 11% say they use questionnaires with some of their patients.
- About 28% of pediatricians have performed or ordered blood alcohol or breath tests on some of their patients during the past year; nearly 60% have performed or ordered urine drug tests.

Pediatricians were asked to respond to a series of questions based on a hypothetical case where a 15-year old male who hasn’t been seen by his pediatrician in two years is brought in for a physical examination. His mother asks that a drug test be performed without telling the adolescent. His grades have slipped and there are communication problems at home. Privately, he candidly admits to having problems with school and family; he says he has experimented with drugs but does not now use them.

Nearly one-half of pediatricians (46%) did not think a urine drug test was clinically indicated for this patient, 33% thought it was, and 20% were uncertain. When asked how they would proceed:

- Nearly one-half of pediatricians (47%) said they would ask for the patient’s consent and order the urine test only if the patient gave consent.
- One in five pediatricians (20%) would inform the patient that the urine drug test will be done before ordering it.
- 14% would not order the test, but would refer the patient for counseling.
- Only 5% said they would order a urine drug test without telling the patient, as the mother had requested.

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The most important factors influencing a pediatrician’s decision whether or not to order a urine drug test when it is requested by an adolescent’s parent are:

- The effect on trust between pediatrician and adolescent (94% rated very important)
- The importance of an early diagnosis of chemical abuse in adolescents (87% rated very important)
- A drop in the patient’s grades (86% rated very important)
- The morality of testing adolescents without their knowledge (85% rated very important)
- The patient’s report of having friends who use alcohol/drugs (83% rated very important)

- About one-half of pediatricians who treat adolescents (51%) say they have had an average of 3.8 parental requests to order a urine or blood drug test without the adolescent’s knowledge during the past year.

- Among pediatricians who say a parent asked them to order a drug test for their adolescent without the adolescent’s knowledge, 20% acted upon the request during the past year (this represents 11% of all respondents who see adolescents). Among pediatricians who were not asked by a parent to test their adolescent for substance abuse during the past year, only 3% ordered a urine or blood drug test without the adolescent’s knowledge.

**Opinions on Issues Surrounding Drug Testing**

- Almost all pediatricians (91%) believe the early discovery and treatment of adolescent chemical abuse/dependence improves their long term prognosis. Fewer than half of pediatricians (42%), however, think urine drug testing is the most accurate method of screening for chemical use in an adolescent, and 30% are unsure. An even smaller number (29%) think random urine drug testing is an accurate indicator of chemical abuse/dependence in an adolescent and 27% are unsure.

- Most pediatricians (82%) believe urine drug testing without the adolescent’s consent is a violation of his/her privacy; 11% are unsure. Three-fourths (77%) say it is unethical to do a urine drug screen on an adolescent who is not aware of the test for the purpose of drug screening; 12% are unsure and 12% disagree.

- Pediatricians are evenly divided in their opinion on whether parents have the right to results of their adolescent’s urine drug test only if the adolescent authorizes a release of information: 40% agree and 39% disagree. Nearly all pediatricians (93%), however, agree parents should be informed of the results of their adolescent’s drug test when there is the likelihood of a possible serious outcome.