



Education vs. Addiction, A Mother's Tale



By Angela Moore, Vice President, Workplace Solutions, Abbott – and Secretary with DATIA (Drug and Alcohol Testing Industry Association)

The best job I have ever had in my life is raising my two amazing daughters. The next best job has been a lifetime role in shaping the drug testing and occupational health industry. As a working mom, the dinner table for my family has often included a lot of ‘free education’ on a myriad of topics associated with illicit drug use, prescription drug use, legal and regulatory implications of drug use, legalization and cultural acceptance of drug use, and a lot of unsolicited advice to my children regarding the importance of a drug safe lifestyle.

To say my work has come home with me over the years is an understatement, and yet within my own family, I did not realize how razor thin the line between educated and addicted could be until I was faced with it in a manner I could never have expected. I've spent my entire 25+ year career in the drug testing and occupational health space. Drug safety is a central topic in my household, and I DID NOT REALIZE how easily these lines could be crossed.

It was the summer of 2017, and my daughter was returning from a trip overseas. We were spending six weeks in New York City on assignment, and she arrived from Paris not feeling well. A trip to the local urgent care resulted in a strep test, a blood draw, and a prescription for antibiotics. In the spirit of antibiotic stewardship, the provider was careful to direct my

daughter to ‘take your prescription until it is all gone.’ The pharmacy was also diligent in their instructions to complete the full antibiotic regimen.

Fast forward a couple of days, and her symptoms had worsened. Still running a high fever with an extremely swollen sore throat, she was miserably sick in our apartment in a strange city. I called the local urgent care back, and they shared that her lab work confirmed she had mononucleosis. Given her current state, they suggested we proceed immediately to the nearest ER for treatment.

I'll spare the details of our experience in the NYC emergency room scene. Suffice to say it was a memorable experience for us! Within a few hours of our arrival, my daughter was given IV fluids, a steroid shot, and another prescription for her severe throat pain. We were happy to be sent on our way.

At the pharmacy, we picked up our full bottle of Oxycontin and headed back to the apartment. As we settled in my daughter asked, “I take these pills until they are all gone, right?” Her words hit me like a brick, and my mind started racing through the events of the day.

The ER doctor said nothing about the risk of what was being prescribed for her pain. He told her to rest, drink fluids, and take her medicine to feel better. The pharmacist said nothing about the risk of addiction with the 21-day supply of narcotics she was given. The pharmacist said to take with food and don't drink alcohol while on the medication. I asked my deliriously ill daughter what she remembered about her instructions. Nothing about the ER doctor directions, and the written material carried

no warnings. She remembered being annoyed at the pharmacist for verifying her birthday on her ID and then telling her (at 18 years old, with her mom) not to drink alcohol. Then, she remembered the instructions she received from her first urgent care visit and prescription. “Take your prescription until it is all gone.” This was the razor thin line.

What if I wasn’t there for that question? What if she was by herself or didn’t have anyone else to ask that could give her the right answer? What could have happened if she finished that entire bottle of narcotics, because she thought that is what they said and didn’t know what it could do to her? Why didn’t she know what I know about synthetic opiates and the high risk of addiction? A different answer to her simple question could be the difference between a bright future and a life tragically altered by addiction.

In the occupational settings we serve and in our communities at large, the education we provide related to drug safety and drug risk is critical. Employees, parents, caregivers, and youth require information to make important decisions about prescription drug use, recreational drug use, and how to protect themselves and their loved ones from the inadvertent harm that could come from missing out on basic, accurate information.

I share my experience with others to illustrate how addiction is an avoidable tragedy and how through education we enable healthy choices. You can lend your expertise toward teachable moments that can have a real impact on health and within your circle of influence keep sharing your narrative, because the lives in your care need to know about drug safety. As a mother, I

was very fortunate to be present for that teachable moment in my family. I was educated in drug safety, so I could provide the appropriate guidance. Thankfully, we avoided crossing the fine line between education vs. addiction.

Focusing on drug safe workplaces will drive more productivity, less absenteeism, and reduced turnover. Employers will save money on benefits utilization, have fewer workplace injuries, and decrease theft when they invest in strong drug deterrence strategies. Working in a drug safe environment also leads to higher job satisfaction, a more positive corporate culture, and a more impactful brand experience for customers. There are many clear financial benefits to having a strong drug deterrence program, but the most important element is not testing for drug use, it’s the education.

Consider offering comprehensive drug safety education as a key topic in your annual safety training curriculum, as part of your corporate wellness initiatives, and incorporate educational programs regarding drug safety into your community outreach activities. Remember, the best drug abuse prevention programs are well advertised and with a design to achieve deterrence, not detection. You are uniquely positioned as an occupational health professional to help someone make a better choice for themselves or their loved ones by simply sharing what you know. ◀



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