

Celebrities enter rehabilitation programs for treatment of their substance abuse disorders with apparent ease. Given millions of dollars in their bank accounts, they can afford to pay for inpatient treatment themselves at luxurious and secluded private facilities and they can often take as much time to complete rehabilitation programs as they need or desire. As an example, one actress reportedly spent an entire summer in Colorado in order to reinforce her inpatient treatment gains.

This is not the manner in which access to treatment plays out in the real world. Many Americans will not obtain any treatment at all for their addictions because they have no health insurance. This group includes many at-risk young adults who, when they graduate from college, lose their health insurance. Moreover, many employers today do not provide health insurance benefits.

For those with health insurance, gaining access to treatment, inpatient or outpatient, can become a very stressful and even fruitless exercise characterized by a great deal of frustration and exasperation.

A professional man with whom I have been speaking regularly has been sober for 60 days now. About 90 days ago he decided to quit drinking because it was causing problems in his personal and professional lives and because he had recently experienced a first offense DUI arrest.

Since, like most people, he was not free to take a significant chunk of time away from his work related responsibilities, he looked into outpatient treatment options. He was also prepared to take up to a week off so that he could participate in an inpatient detox program.

He remembers calling between six and seven treatment facilities for information. The situation at each one was similar: long waiting lists, numerous calls, several facilities told him that they did not know exactly when a bed would become available for detox, that people left frequently, that he should call early each morning in order to ascertain whether a bed would become available that day or not and that he would need to be prepared to enter the facility with only a few hours notice.

When he told individuals at three or four of these facilities how bad he felt, struggling daily on his own to abstain from alcohol, each one said essentially the same thing: call an ambulance and go to the emergency room of a hospital.

Finally he decided to forget about inpatient detox and to focus on the outpatient route. From that point on, it took him a month to get an appointment with an intake case worker. The intake process required three more appointments spaced a week apart. It took an additional 30 days before he finally secured an appointment with a physician.

What is most significant about this saga is that he was not even given the initial intake appointment until after he had filed a complaint with his insurance company.

By the time this man finally met with the doctor, nearly 90 days had passed and, against all odds, he had achieved sobriety on his own for the preceding 60 of those days. The detox assistance and the drugs that he had hoped to secure in order to minimize painful withdrawal symptoms and to reduce strong cravings had become irrelevant.

Despite the fact that this man is covered by health insurance and despite the fact that he successfully navigated all of the roadblocks presented to him by the treatment facilities themselves and by his health insurer, he had nevertheless succeeded in obtaining essentially no treatment for his addiction at all.

The intake official at an addictions treatment facility recently told me that it is becoming increasingly difficult to secure approval for inpatient treatment of cocaine and heroin addictions as well. The latest thinking among health insurers is that such addictions may be amenable to outpatient intervention.

One can only wonder how many addicted individuals, struggling on their own to achieve sobriety, relapse into their addictions while they wade through such an intransigent and non-responsive system and eventually give up the struggle.

At this time, the United States has one of the highest rates of substance abuse and addiction in the entire world.

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