

Part B Insider (Multispecialty) Coding Alert

Reader Question: How Can We Screen New Staffers?

Question: We had a staff member who we caught taking some prescription samples for herself. We later learned that she had a prescription drug habit, so our practice partners are considering doing drug screening tests before we hire. Are we allowed to do this?

Answer: The debate over whether drug screening in the workplace is beneficial has been ongoing. While some experts believe workplace testing reduces drug use, others believe it's a civil rights violation. In a medical practice, you may feel even more pressure to make the right call.

If your practice is considering drug testing (or is second-guessing the effectiveness of current drug testing), be knowledgeable about the topic.

Here are a few points of interest you might want to bring to the table:

- **When will you screen?** Some employers perform drug testing as a pre-employment requirement, but others subject employees to random drug testing throughout their time with the practice. Your practice management and providers should have an idea of when they want to screen employees for drug use. It might also be a good idea to reserve drug screening for those employees whose work performance arouses suspicion of drug use.

- **Be ready to follow through.** Many employers, especially smaller ones, might not prepare for a scenario in which an employee tests positive for drug use. What if that employee is one of five people vital to your small office? Or what if she's your only nurse?

You might be put in a situation where you can lose a talented employee due to your drug screening policies. So think about whether your company is prepared to deal with the consequences if a test returns an answer you don't want to hear.

- **Consider the moral question.** Many employers don't feel right judging what their employees do outside of the workplace □ especially if their performance on the job is up to par.

As an alternative, you may want to perform background checks on job candidates and leave it at that.

- **Is it worth the cost?** Again, this depends on your practice's size and economic stability. You can expect to spend between \$35 and \$50 per employee on drug screening. If you're part of a large group, this price might not affect your bottom line much □ but smaller practices can feel the pinch.