

I cannot tell you my name, or where I live, or even the specialty within which I practice medicine. I learned that addiction would be a lifelong condition, but not a lifelong impairment, and I agreed to a long term monitoring contract with PHS. I share this intimate tale so that you, my colleagues and friends in the medical field, can hear the human side of addictive disease, of its treacherous grip, and of the freedom and confidence from which I have emerged from this terrifying illness. Not only did I face the legal and professional ramifications of having written improper prescriptions, but I had to cope with the personal humiliation of a fall from grace. With the guidance of Physician Health Services (PHS), I got into a treatment program that helped me realize that I suffered from a virulent illness and was both worthy and deserving of help. I did not think about the record I was establishing of their purported use, nor did I think about the records of my own prescribing practices. And then one day, the Drug Enforcement Agency came to the door inquiring about fraudulent prescriptions. I attended support group meetings, met with sponsors and mentors, and in doing so, changed my life dramatically. Unfortunately, my career was not yet ready for me. Despite the fact that I had never had a malpractice case and had never harmed a patient, there would be months of waiting for the licensing board to address my petition to go back to work. Even today, years later, I fear retribution, liability, and even prosecution. Then, one evening when I was finding it hard to stay awake to study for an organic chemistry exam, a friend directed me to some stimulants that were available in sample form. After all, I was no street junkie making covert deals in dark alleys. I enjoyed my status and felt it was deserved, having achieved academically as well as socially since childhood. I was no druggie engaged in covert activities, and I was certainly no criminal. I was an admired and respected physician. The shame and magnitude of my tumble was immeasurable. I was medically detoxified from the effects of the medications I had now stopped taking. I would be investigated, questioned and challenged. I cannot do so for I have been shamed, embarrassed, and at times stigmatized. I was never a drinker in high school or even in college, nor did I use drugs socially. I began using the pills, rather innocently, whenever I needed a boost. I had no experience running a business, was working long hours, and was unable to juggle the growing load. Despite my drug use, I was a physician with a thriving practice. I provided quality care and had no patient complaints. I had a wife and children that relied upon me and saw me as a great provider. My friends and family admired me. I was respected in the community. I was no longer the icon of success I had worked a lifetime to achieve. I was now tainted, not only in the eyes of my colleagues, but also, for the very first time, in my own. Fortunately, when everything was crumbling around me, I got support and advice. I saw a therapist to address issues of addiction, shame, honesty and interpersonal relationships. I submitted to regular and random drug screens. My patient load grew exponentially, and I had trouble keeping pace. I was a good doctor, with many patients, using my medical knowledge to make the path toward success a bit smoother. My drug use escalated. In addition to Internet orders I would write prescriptions in the names of my family members. Suddenly, my uncle had knee pain, my father-in-law back problems, my aunt arthritis. Throughout this time I still felt on top. The reality of the situation took months to sink in. My reaction was disbelief. To comply with this contract, I had to work hard. My drug use did not begin until medical school.