



'Intervention' Trades Free Treatment for Addicts' Stories

High Cost of Treatment Makes Free Rehab Inticing

By **EMILY FRIEDMAN**

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While filming drug and alcohol addicts at their weakest moments -- while they shoot up heroin or down liters of liquor -- has turned the show "Intervention" into a TV phenomenon, it has also made cable channel A&E the target of complaints that the show is exploitive.

But addiction specialists tell ABCNEWS.com that offering addicts complimentary treatment in return for their stories, as A&E does for "Intervention," could make a huge difference in their chances of recovery.

The makers of "Intervention" record hours of footage of bingeing crack addicts and drunks spiraling out-of-control before eventually organizing a family-led intervention and a 90-day stay at a rehabilitation center -- all for free.

In one "Intervention" episode, cameras roll as "Ryan," a young drummer addicted to OxyContin, shoots up as many as 15 times a day. And then there's "Betsy," who drinks up to five bottles of white wine a day, despite already having gone to detox several times.

Other episodes depict a former high school valedictorian spending her days betting at the racetrack to support her Vicodin habit; a former child preacher tells how being molested by a male friend caused him to turn to meth, and he now smokes meth in his bedroom while his mom sings religious songs downstairs; and a crack-addict smokes up in the parking lot of the rehab facility he's about to enter.

It makes for addictive TV, but what would compel any family to air such raw, ugly dysfunction?

"[Families] turn to us not only for financial help but to get emotional help, and to understand how to get better," said Sam Mettler, the creator and executive producer of "Intervention." "But treatment centers are very expensive, and the average American can't afford it."

"It takes a tremendous amount of courage for a family to put their life's horror on camera," he said. "But they've been living a nightmare for years and don't know what to do."

Prohibitive Costs

Health professionals agree that one of the biggest barriers preventing drug addicts from receiving treatment is the cost. Stays at in-patient treatment centers like the ones that appear on "Intervention" can range from \$12,000 to more than \$50,000 per month-long stay -- a cost that can be prohibitive.

"It's not that we don't know how to treat the illness, it's that people don't have the financial resources available to them get treatment that works," said Michael Miller, president-elect of the American Society of Addiction Medicine.

Though Miller and other addiction experts declined to speak specifically about "Intervention," most agreed access to free rehab could be crucial to the recovery of addicts who can't afford to pay for help themselves, and whose insurance plans often don't even cover the kind of medical attention they need

"When [addicts] notice their insurance doesn't cover addiction treatment very well or at all, then they just don't get the treatment," Miller said.

Despite Savings, Critics Concerned

Still, critiques about the ethics of taping addicts while they're high or drunk -- even with the added incentive of free treatment -- have dogged "Intervention."

"When someone is [suffering from addiction] we can assume that their judgment is impaired and they're not in their right mind, and they may say or do things that will later come back and haunt them in their later lives," said Andrew Tatarsky, a licensed psychologist and addiction therapist. "Now they've got these public records of things that may hurt their future careers and reputations."

Addicts who appear on "Intervention" are told they are being filmed for a documentary on addiction, said Mettler, and while their families know about the impending intervention and treatment program, the addicts themselves do not.

Whether "Intervention's" method of filming addicts is accepted or not, many medical professionals say that free treatment is still a unique and ultimately helpful opportunity.

Cost Prevents Addicts from Getting Help

In 2006, 23.6 million people showed symptoms of treatable drug or alcohol abuse, but only 2.5 million, or just over 10 percent, actually received treatment, according to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, which is published by the Substance Abuse and Health Services Administration.

The lack of insurance coverage is one of the major reasons for this disparity, Miller argued.

There are bills currently pending in Congress that would make insurance coverage equal for medical treatment and addiction treatment. Known as "parity legislation," they would bring about major change in helping more addicts get treatment, said Miller, who estimates that the average person could get treated for around \$12,000.

Even when insurance companies do cover addiction treatment, there are often lots of loopholes that make the coverage extremely limited, said Carol McDaid, a member of the board of directors of Faces and Voices, a nonprofit organization that advocates on behalf of substance abusers.

"[Some plans] will have a medical necessity criteria, which means the insured will have to be either homicidal or suicidal at the time of the health assessment [to get in-patient coverage at a rehab center]," said McDaid, who is a recovering alcohol and drug addict herself. "Other plans will have a 'fail first' policy, in which the person will have to fail an out-patient program before they will get coverage for an in-patient program."

But long-term in-patient programs aren't always the best treatment, even if you are insured, added addiction therapist Tatarsky.

"There's much too much emphasis on very expensive 30-day rehabs which have a lower success rate," said Tatarsky. "There's this implication that if you go away for 30 days you'll get fixed, but the issues are often much more complex and really require more of an ongoing, deep individual psychotherapy."

Promise of Treatment Hard to Turn Down

Mettler, the show's creator, believes many families decide to apply to "Intervention" because of the promise of free treatment.

Several treatment centers throughout the United States "partner" with the television show and provide what Mettler refers to as "scholarships" to addicts who appear on the show. While the minimum requirement for treatment under the show's guidelines is a 90-day inpatient program, Mettler said that often times rehab centers will even offer to provide additional services at no cost.

Mettler understands the concerns about show participants being branded as addicts. But he said even that can be beneficial.

"It is attractive treatment? Of course," said Mettler. "But the addicts do our show out of altruism -- they truly want to help other people by sharing their stories. They don't want anyone to become like them."

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