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Detox for the Camera. Doctor's Order!

By KARA JESELLA

ON the first episode of the VH1 reality series "Celebrity Rehab With Dr. Drew," Jeff Conaway arrives for in-patient treatment at the Pasadena Recovery Center in California slumped over in the passenger seat of a car, caressing an open bottle of Dom Pérignon. The actor, who starred in the television show "Taxi" and the movie "Grease," describes himself as "loaded," for which he blames people who, the night before, accused him of being an addict.

"How dare they," Dr. Drew Pinsky says in a deadpan bit of gallows humor meant to lighten the mood.

An easy rapport with television cameras and celebrity also-rans is not part of the job description for the typical doctor. But with his soap-opera looks and cool-dad aura, Dr. Pinsky, 49, has been famous in his own right for 25 years, all while navigating a precarious balance of professionalism and salaciousness.

"I have a pretty keen ethical compass," Dr. Pinsky said by telephone from Pasadena, Calif., where he has a general medicine practice and is the medical director of the department of chemical dependency services at Las Encinas Hospital. "That's why I can walk this line."

Some fans and fellow professionals say that with "Celebrity Rehab" he has careened over it. The show features low-wattage personalities, including the actress [Brigitte Nielsen](#), an alumna of "The Surreal Life," and Jessica Sierra, a former "American Idol" contestant, undergoing detoxification treatments and group therapy under Dr. Pinsky's supervision. They can be seen throwing up, crying and having [seizures](#) on camera — images that are much grimmer than your average public-service announcement.

Since the debut of "Celebrity Rehab" last month, Dr. Pinsky has been criticized by bloggers, recovering addicts, the news media and addiction specialists among others, who question his motivation for doing the show and challenge his confessional treatment methods, which seem to play to the television cameras.

"I'm not confident that people who are patients, if you want to call them that, are in the best position to make decisions for themselves relative to such theatrics," said William C. Moyers, the executive director of the Center for Public Advocacy at Hazelden, a nonprofit rehabilitation and recovery center.

The VH1 series, Mr. Moyers said, was "yet another example of the dumbing down and trivialization of a very serious chronic illness that robs people of their dignity and respect."

From the time Dr. Pinsky emerged as a radio personality in 1982, he has mostly managed to stay above the fray. About that time, while still in medical school, acquaintances at the Los Angeles station KROQ persuaded him to join a late-night call-in radio show that was eventually titled "Loveline."

On "Loveline," he advised callers on sex and relationships and also engaged in off-color banter with celebrities and such co-hosts as Adam Carolla, whose raunchy comedy made Dr. Pinsky, with his studied paternalism, seem that more professional.

By the time "Loveline" became a television show on [MTV](#) in 1996, Dr. Pinsky had become the Gen-X answer to Dr. [Ruth Westheimer](#), with an [AIDS](#)-era, pro-safe-sex message.

"You had Dr. Ruth encouraging people to have more sex," Dr. Pinsky said. "That was going to kill people."

His work on "Loveline" led to other opportunities, including appearances in the movie "Wild Hogs" and on the television show "Dawson's Creek." He remains a frequent magazine talking-head and talk-show guest, turning up recently on news and entertainment programs to speculate about the cause of [Heath Ledger's](#) death and the state of [Britney Spears's mental health](#).

"My goal was always to be part of pop culture and relevant to young people, to interact with the people they hold in high esteem," Dr. Pinsky said. "I have no social life except for the time I spend on the air with these people."

But as the public has become fed up with the sad shenanigans of messed-up celebrities, so too have they wearied of the famous doctors they perceive to be trying to increase their own star power by association.

Last month, Dr. Phil McGraw, the talk-show psychologist and one-man self-help franchise, visited Britney Spears after she was admitted to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. Later, Dr. McGraw issued a statement about her mental health and announced plans for a show about the troubled star, leading to accusations that he was breaking medical codes of ethics in an attempt to increase his ratings.

"I'm getting some of that backlash," Dr. Pinsky said.

An advocacy group for recovering addicts, Faces and Voices of Recovery, began a letter-writing campaign to VH1, criticizing "Celebrity Rehab." The entertainment Web site [Hollywood.com](#) chided Dr. Pinsky for being the best television doctor with ulterior motives.

"People call it exploitative; I'm confused by that," said Dr. Pinsky. The celebrities on the show "know exactly what they're getting into and have allowed to resolve the problem, to help others," he added.

Dr. Pinsky's longtime colleagues are quick to note that, unlike many media pundits who have just Ph.D.s, or have let their medical licenses lapse, Dr. Pinsky is a board-certified physician.

"I was with the guy for 11 years," said Mr. Carolla, his former "Loveline" sidekick. "He would make the rounds at the hospital every day. I felt sorry for him, because he would get lumped in with the Dr. Lauras and the Dr. Phils."

Some fans worry that Dr. Pinsky is now taking advantage of celebrities on a channel known for turning bad behavior into hit programs, posting their concern on message boards on the VH1 Web site. "I have lost all respect for Dr. Drew," one fan wrote. "Dr. Drew should be ashamed to be part of this 'Survivor With [Cigarettes](#)' show," wrote another.

Dr. Pinsky said he had concerns when a producer approached him with the idea for the show. "I thought it couldn't be done ethically, clinically," he said. He said he changed his mind when a colleague complained that there were no portrayals of rehab in the media he thought were authentic.

Dr. Pinsky initially wanted to feature noncelebrities, then decided against it. "During the interview process, the regular people had no idea what they were getting into," he said. "They couldn't render consent. Celebrities understood. They got it."

On the first episode of "Celebrity Rehab," Seth Binzer of the band Crazy Town, eagerly produced a crack pipe for the camera and then proceeded to smoke.

"I've had cameras on me the last 10 years of my life," Mr. Binzer said in a telephone interview, adding that he has stayed sober since the show was filmed in August. "I'm comfortable around cameras."

Dr. Pinsky declined to comment on the sobriety of his "Celebrity Rehab" patients while the show is still airing. "Some of that is part of the drama," Dr. Pinsky said. But he added that Mr. Binzer was not an anomaly.

"All of them are significantly improved or actively engaged in recovery," Dr. Pinsky said. "I feel it was a transformative experience with them."

Like many addicts, some of the "Celebrity Rehab" subjects have fallen off the wagon, including Ms. Sierra, the "American Idol" contestant, who was arrested for disorderly intoxication and obstruction of an officer.

At the behest of Dr. Pinsky, a circuit judge in Tampa, Fla., agreed to send Ms. Sierra to a private rehabilitation clinic, rather than to jail. But the judge also chastised both doctor and patient saying, "I don't want this to be some sort of stepping stone for her to have some sort of a career as a recovering addict."

Mr. Binzer had no criticism for Dr. Pinsky, whom he cited as the reason he agreed to do the show.

"I had done 'Loveline' a couple of times," Mr. Binzer said. "I already knew I loved Drew and thought he was a good guy, lighthearted. For such a conservative doctor guy, he's still very hip. I've been in a lot of treatment centers, and this is the one that worked for me."

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