

January 12, 2008

By email

Mr. Tom Calderone  
President  
VH1

Dear Mr. Calderone:

This letter is to follow up on our January 8, 2008 letter to you regarding “Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew.” After viewing the show on Thursday, our concerns about the show and its impact have heightened, not lessened.

Faces & Voices of Recovery is an organization of 18,000 individuals and organizations dedicated to making it possible for people to get the help that they need to recover from addiction. It is our belief that the show takes advantage of and uses people in deep distress because of their addiction as a way to draw in viewers. I can’t think of another illness for which we would dramatize the struggles of individuals in such a graphic fashion.

We don’t have reality shows called “Celebrity Cancer with Dr. First Name Only” or “Celebrity Diabetes with Dr. First Name Only.” That’s because, as a society, we still have a long way to go with regard to treating people with addiction like people with other illnesses. Your program will not help change public attitudes. As a matter of fact, it will set back public understanding of addiction and recovery and further stigmatize individuals with this medical condition. It reinforces myths about who struggles with addiction and the inability of individuals to really recover from addiction.

The show promos and the show itself were edited to artificially heighten the drama in a way that serves only to sensationalize addiction and the behavior of those on the program. At times it was hard to tell what was real and what was the “reality show.” The repeated showing of the footage of the ambulance pulling up to the treatment center, frequent shots of Jeff Conaway slumped over in his wheel chair and Mary Carey striking sexual poses was simply exploitative. The fact that the individuals on the show are celebrities makes this situation even more problematic. Your host has acknowledged in media interviews that because they are celebrities, they have personality traits that drive them to seek fame, even in the depths of their addiction. Addiction should not be a commercial, audience-grabbing pursuit.

The unfortunate fact is that in most of America, when people receive treatment for addiction, it’s not in the fantastic facilities where Dr. Pinsky practices,. Most people who get help receive it at publicly-financed treatment facilities. That’s because private health insurance companies discriminate against people with addiction by denying them coverage or charging higher co-pays and deductibles. The show is setting up a dangerous,

false reality for most of America and may in fact set back our efforts to change this discriminatory system.

We believe that when people see this show, they'll wonder why they should help people with addiction and why people should get insurance coverage for their care. And that's a real problem. We still don't require insurance companies to cover addiction and mental illness like other health problems. That's why Congress is considering the Paul Wellstone Mental Health and Addiction Equity Act, a bill that would require insurance companies to provide coverage for addiction like other health problems.

We need to stop sensationalizing people who are still struggling with addiction and get help to the over 22 million Americans who have yet to experience the reality of long-term recovery, which is enjoyed by millions of Americans and their families. People do get recovery and their lives, and the lives of their families, are better as a result.

We urge you to take the following steps to put a little reality into "Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew":

1. Open and close the show with Dr. Pinsky making an affirmative statement about the many effective treatments available to people still struggling with addiction and the reality of long-term recovery from addiction. We would be happy to work with your staff to draft such a statement.
2. Provide information on your Web site about the many ways that people can get help to recover from addiction, including mutual support groups, medication-assisted treatment, professional treatment, and faith, including links to the federal government's Treatment Locator.
3. Add a crawl during the show promoting the link to your Web site for more information on where people can seek help.

We look forward to hearing back from you about the steps that you will be taking.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Pat Taylor". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Patricia Taylor  
Executive Director

cc: Brett Henne, VH1  
cc: Robin Hopkins, VH1

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