

NMC uses hair follicle testing to root out alcohol and drug misuse

By Laura Doherty

Drug and alcohol tests on hair have been introduced by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) in fitness-to-practise cases where substance dependency is thought to be involved.

The regulator has signed a 12-month contract with UK company Trimega Laboratories, which provides hair follicle testing to examine a person's drug or alcohol history.

Of the 43 cases of impairment of fitness to practise considered by the NMC health committee in 2006/07, 23 per cent related to alcohol misuse and 20 per cent to drugs.

Allegations

Where allegations of substance misuse are being considered by the committee, an independent doctor on the panel will now be able to ask registrants to consent to a hair test.

An NMC spokesperson said: 'Individuals will not be tested unless they have given their written consent. It is often the nurse or midwife who

volunteers to be tested as a way of disproving allegations against them or, in some instances, proving that they do not have a problem with drugs or alcohol.'

By examining the hair shaft, the test can reveal excessive alcohol consumption and persistent use of

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drugs such as cocaine, cannabis and methamphetamine.

Representatives of the RCN, Unison and Unite/Community Practitioners' and Health Visitors' Association (CPHVA), who represent registrants at fitness-to-practise hearings, were not aware of the NMC's introduction of hair follicle testing, or its validity.

Cheryll Adams, professional officer for research and development at the CPHVA, told *Nursing Standard*: 'I am surprised I am not aware of it. It is an emotive issue, and a great

many nurses will have views about it.' The NMC said it was not required to consult registrants on using this new method, as they already employ drug and alcohol tests.

Employers survey

A recent survey conducted by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) shows 60 per cent of employers have a drink and drug policy, and 22 per cent test employees for substance misuse.

■ The NMC's *Fitness to Practise Annual Report*, issued last week, reveals almost three in four complaints were dismissed at the first stage in 2006/07. The NMC conduct and competence committee completed 115 cases, with 75 practitioners being struck off, 17 cautioned, six having conditions placed on their practice and four suspended. In 13 cases no further action was taken.

One in five of the cases related to dishonesty, such as theft or fraud, with the second most common allegation relating to patient abuse.