

Utah's Drug Endangered Children



Over the years we have had the privilege of working directly with the Courts and Judges to ensure the safety of Utah's Drug Endangered Children. Assessing and testing the children for exposure to methamphetamine and other substances is one of the keys to determining and ensuring their safety.

The belief among medical, criminal justice and social services professionals is that the most effective tool for assessing exposure is a comprehensive medical examination. The examination should assess medical, psychological, social and developmental needs. On occasion, inclusion of a hair analysis as part of the assessment has been requested or court ordered.

Hair analysis testing, as a tool for Courts and Judges, should not be the only method of assessing the child for exposure to drug exposed settings. Frequently, findings from the scene provide the best evidence of what drugs and environmental conditions the child was exposed to – and what the child may test positive for. Although hair analysis can detect exposure within an approximate three month period of time, with hair growing approximately 1/8th inch per week, there is no specific date of exposure that the positive test indicates, but merely that the child has had exposure. There are additional problems associated with the accuracy of hair analysis. The uptake of the drugs being tested may vary in light hair or hair that has been treated with dyes, chemicals, etc. This may result in falsely negative test results.

After careful review, it is the recommendation of the Utah Drug Endangered Children Medical Advisory Team (DECMAT) that hair analysis testing alone does not provide the comprehensive information needed for the Courts to make the most informed decision about the child's welfare. Professionals experienced in the assessment of suspected drug endangerment recommend that a comprehensive medical examination be ordered. This examination may include a hair analysis if the Courts feel it is important to the case. A Court order for a hair analysis should accompany the request for the comprehensive evaluation. However, it may need to be performed at a clinic or laboratory equipped to do hair analysis with a chain of custody.

Thus, from this point forward, when the Courts and Judges suspect drug endangerment of a child, we suggest a request for a comprehensive medical examination, as this is the most critical need. The needs of these children are complex and often referrals for in depth testing and specialists need to take place.

Each area of the state has a Children's Justice Center that can provide referral information and a listing of medical providers that can perform these examinations.

South Main Clinic: Julie Steele, FNP (801) 468-3690

Fostering Healthy Children (statewide): 1-800-829-8200 #8
Chris Chytraus, RN, BSN, CPM (801) 584-8598 office

Primary Children's Medical Center /Center for Safe and Healthy Families:
(801) 662-3600

Children's Justice Centers, where medical exams take place throughout the state.