

CASE STUDY

Addict ethnomethods to deceive the doctor

In the mid-1990s I was conducting research at a number of daytime addict treatment centers in Milan, Italy. I recorded the following verbal exchange between a nurse and a doctor at one of the centers:

Nurse: I reckon it's been fiddled.

Doctor: We'll have to be more careful next time.

The slang term 'fiddle' applied to a patient's urine caught my attention. The term referred to the practice ('fiddling the urine'), quite common among patients, of faking their urine samples. In some centers the 'handover' of the weekly quantity of take-home methadone (usually seven daily doses) was conditional upon a formal agreement that the patient would not use narcotics. In exchange for the take-home doses the patient agreed to undergo urine tests (when ordered to do so by the doctor and therefore without prior notice). The laboratory analysis was able to detect traces of drugs taken even a week earlier. Patients who breached the agreement risked losing their take-home privilege, so that they would once again have to go to the treatment center every day for their methadone (this they hated because it disrupted their work and routine). So patients who had breached the agreement during the week, and who feared that drug traces would be found in their urine, devised various stratagems (ethnomethods) to hoodwink the doctor. One of these methods was to give another person's urine sample. To counter this ruse, patients were required to urinate in the center's toilet under a nurse's supervision. Further techniques were therefore invented: for instance, concealing a small plastic bag of someone else's urine in the vagina; or fitting oneself with a long, thin plastic tube attached to a douche-bag containing another person's urine, the bag being placed under the armpit and then squeezed to produce the sample. The bogus urine sample was concealed in the vagina or the armpit so that it could be kept warm: cold liquid would have revealed the deception.

The slang term 'fiddle' would obviously have attracted a researcher's attention, while he would probably not have noticed the apparently uninteresting expression 'be more careful.' Yet this too denoted a specific organizational practice: the checks performed by the staff.