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Stars Check In, Stars Check Out

By SHARON WAXMAN JUNE 17, 2007

LOS ANGELES

GOSSIP columns noted breathlessly this month that Lindsay Lohan, cocooned in high-class rehab in Malibu after crashing her Mercedes on Sunset Boulevard, had stepped off the premises to go to the gym.

Was she breaking the rules? Were the rules bent to suit her? Either way, the idea that she might soon win her battle with substance abuse seemed, given the evidence, unduly optimistic. Not yet 21, she is halfway through a second stint in rehab.

But optimism, it turns out, is one of the main things offered at rehabilitation centers like Promises, the luxurious Malibu retreat for patients suffering from alcohol and substance abuse where Ms. Lohan now lives.

Much harder to come by is evidence that these programs work. The quiet truth in the upper-crust rehabilitation industry is that \$49,000 a month may buy lots of things — including views of the Pacific, massage therapy and blue-ribbon chefs. But whether it buys sobriety is very uncertain.

Reliable statistics about drug rehabilitation as a whole are hard to come by, and

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Ms. Lohan went before; Crossroads in Antigua, which briefly welcomed Britney Spears; and nearly a dozen other places along a 10-mile stretch in Malibu.

Government studies suggest that drug treatment does reduce drug abuse — a sprawling, vague term for the vast catalog of substance-related ills — by 40 to 60 percent.

But government studies also suggest that 80 percent of addicts will relapse after treatment. And experts in the field seem to agree that the success rate for rehab programs, most of which are based on the 12-step therapy created by Alcoholics Anonymous, hovers somewhere between 30 percent at best, and below 10 percent at worst.

“The therapeutic community claims a 30 percent success rate, but they only count people who complete the program,” said Joseph A. Califano Jr., who founded the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University. “Seventy to eighty percent drop out in three to six months.”

“There is not a large body of research on the effectiveness of 12 steps,” said Timothy P. Condon, the deputy director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, a part of the National Institutes of Health. “Setting up a program, making it luxurious, using things that are not rigorously tested, I don’t know the benefit of that. If I was going to spend a lot of money, I’d want to see outcomes.”

THESE are hard to find. That is partly because of the different kinds of addiction, and the different kinds of programs that treat it. There also is little agreement on how to measure success. Urine tests, the scientific way to find out if someone has relapsed, are not a practical way for luxury rehab centers to follow up on their clients (“Hi, Britney? Did you send in the kit?”).

Asked what the success rate is at Promises, its owner, Richard Rogg, said: “There’s no way to effectively measure success rates. Any program bragging of a success rate is not telling the truth.”

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does he measure it? After a long pause, he said, "By the strength and effectiveness of our alumni program."

Howard C. Samuels, the director of Wonderland, which charges \$40,000 for a 30-day stay, was similarly imprecise, though he agreed that the accepted statistics are not encouraging. "If I believed in statistics I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you," he said. "But any treatment center that gives you high success rates is, I believe, very arrogant. It's a process."

The process at Wonderland, a three-acre gated estate perched above Beverly Hills, involves a nutritionist, yoga instructors, spiritual guide and plenty of flexibility. "Recovery does not need to isolate you from your friends, family or career," its Web site says. "Recognizing the necessity of performers fulfilling pre-existing commitments when they are in need of treatment, Wonderland has developed a working solution to this all too familiar problem."

Ms. Lohan went shopping when she stayed there earlier this year. As at Promises, clients who leave the premises are accompanied.

Dr. Samuels, a clinical psychologist, said that Wonderland recognized that integrating people back into their normal lives was an important part of recovery. "If you spend your whole time at a treatment center, when you leave you're not prepared for the stresses and anxieties on the outside."

But other experts say that the more permissive attitude of high-end residential programs is primarily a reflection of the demands of a new generation of affluent addicts, more pampered and less inclined to endure the tough-minded approach of the past. There is also a recognition that four decades or so of the A.A.-based approach have produced only the slimmest evidence of success.

"It's not a good thing or a bad thing, it's uncharted waters," said Clare Waismann, the executive director of the Domus Retreat in Anaheim, Calif., speaking of the new leniency. "They're trying new approaches. You can't tell Lindsay Lohan she can never have a beer again or she's failed. She will fail."

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“These treatment centers have worked in the same manner for 40 years, and the success rate has been extremely low,” she said. “For business reasons, most of these rehabs are trying to adapt to the new starlets and their needs, allowing them to go to work and come back, go shopping, use their cellphones. This is all new for the 12-step world. They’re pretty much the guinea pigs of change in the rehab world.”

The Domus Retreat does not use the 12-step model, with its emphasis on recognizing dependence as a lifelong problem that can be managed in meetings with fellow addicts. Ms. Waismann takes a medical approach to addiction, based, she said, on Israeli research with addicted soldiers. Her staff uses drugs to help addicts through withdrawal, reversing what they say is a chemical imbalance in the brain. The retreat charges \$28,000 a month.

At Passages in Malibu, Chris Prentiss, who founded the rehabilitation center with his son, also rejects the 12 steps. Boldly claiming an 84.4 percent success rate since opening his doors in 2001, and even more boldly asking \$67,550 per month, Mr. Prentiss says he has found a cure for addiction. He starts by rejecting the long-accepted idea that it is a disease.

Mr. Prentiss said the trouble with A.A. is that it addresses the symptoms of addiction — the desire to drink or use drugs — rather than the underlying reasons for doing so, which may be physiological, or stem from personal trauma from past or current life situations that make it difficult to cope.

“They believe that alcoholism is a disease and an incurable one, and the same for addiction,” he said of 12-step programs. “That’s a dirty trick. At Passages we reinforce a person’s ability to completely cure themselves of dependency. The first thing we give them is hope: ‘You’re going to be fine.’ ”

The approach at Passages involves intense one-on-one therapy and medical supervision, up to 20 individual sessions a week, to uncover the reasons people seek an altered reality. Patients do not generally leave the property, he said. “At the end of the day they do not want to go to a movie, they want to go to bed,” he said. Mr. Prentiss said he was called after Ms. Lohan crashed her car and asked to find her a

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Mr. Prentiss's claim of 84.4 percent success is based, he said, on phone interviews of 1,000 Passages graduates, not including 12 percent with whom contact has been lost.

Asked about this, Mr. Rogg of Promises scoffed. "That's ridiculous," he said. "Believe me, he doesn't have an 84 percent success rate. Nobody does. Part of the problem in talking about a success rate is you're talking to an alcoholic to gather that information, who is ready to lie and not give you accurate facts."

A spokesman for A.A. World Services in New York said the organization does not collect data about participants and cannot cite how successful its 12-step programs are.

Mr. Califano of the national center on addiction, which focuses on research and public policy, said that the entire treatment system is run with a lack of professional standards that would be unacceptable in any other field of medicine. He has tried to get rehabilitation centers to give his group data to analyze their effectiveness. "Objective analysis would require knowing everything that is done with that person in rehab, and following them for six months to a year, and do an actual urine or hair test," he said. "No one lets us do that."

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