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The Logistics of International Collections

Executive Summary

The most important aspect to remember when organizing a collection outside of the United States is patience. Workplace drug testing is so common in the U.S., many employers expect next day service. This is not the case in many countries across the globe, but the situation is changing. As U.S. Multinational companies seek to implement standard drug and alcohol polices across all of their facilities, the network of collection sites around the world grows. In addition to the U.S. companies implementing policies, more European countries are enacting drug testing legislation under Health and Safety regulations. These new laws and regulations are in response to the growing drugs of abuse problem being seen in many countries. But even as the drugs abuse problem grows, there are still some countries where it is almost impossible to arrange for a drug screen collection.

Hurdles to surmount when organizing a collection include;

- Type of collection - (urine specimens are recommended)
- Cultural differences
- Time differences and seasonal and holiday variations
- Language
- Laws and guidelines
- Lack of familiarity (no one did it before)

- Logistics – laboratories, collections (sites, mobile collectors), transport, test results
- Cost of the collection
- Payment to collection sites - sites will only accept payment in local currency
- Donors signing of chain of custody documentation – (if the donor cannot read English, they may not be comfortable signing a document they don't understand)

One particular challenge with international collections is getting quality collections. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) guidelines are not followed outside USA and there are some geographical areas that follow no particular collection guidelines at all. If you decide to test for drugs outside of the USA, it would be best if you adjusted your process for each country. You will find that you can not implement one standard procedure for all international markets.

The first step in any international collection is to find a collection site where someone on the staff speaks and understands English. Once you can communicate with the staff, there are two ways to go about an international collection. The first is to find a collection site and have the specimen shipped to a lab in the U.S.; or secondly, have the specimen collected and tested at a local laboratory. Both routes have their advantages and disadvantages. If you choose to have the specimen tested at the local laboratory, be sure to inquire:

- What is the process followed by the collection site
- What are the laboratories accreditations (locally accredited laboratories may not be of the same standard as US laboratories.)
- How long will it take to receive the results
- How will you receive the results

Collections are done in a majority of the countries around the world each day, so do not hesitate to start drug testing. You just need to know how to get started and where to start.

Practical issues

Logistics

To get a collection done where the integrity of the sample is legally defensible there are some points that must be addressed. The most important point is that the collector needs to have the appropriate collection materials, which include a sterile collection cup (with temperature strip), transportation vial if collection cup cannot be closed, security seals, chain -of-custody documents and proper shipping materials as required by the transportation company. When there is a request for a collection in a remote location where they do not do collections or they do not occur more than a few times per year, the collection provider needs to have these materials provided to them. When scheduling these types of collections, you will need to account for the time it takes for the materials to arrive to the collector. You will also need to be sure that collectors are properly trained on your protocols. Only when this is done, can a collection be scheduled.

Training of collectors

In countries such as Sweden and United Kingdom, collector training courses are readily available and are at the same level as courses in the U.S. But this is not the case in most countries. It is generally left up to the provider of the collection service to organize this training and to monitor for collector errors. Completion of paperwork, such as commercial invoices and courier transport airbills, may also be difficult for untrained collectors to complete properly. Again, communication is essential. The more information that you can provide the collector, the better.

Couriers, postal services and transport

The most important point when preparing a specimen for transportation is that it is packaged and labeled properly. Check with the local agent for transportation before the collection is performed. Proper packaging and labeling will prevent any delays in the transportation of the specimen between the collection site and the laboratory.

Remember to explore your options when transporting specimens. Shipping specimens via the local postal service in countries like Sweden or the UK is an acceptable method, and it can reduce your cost as well. It is not recommended using the local postal service for transportation between two countries. Samples may be lost or delayed and are almost impossible to track. Our advice is to always use worldwide couriers for transport when the samples are being transported from one country to another.

Cultural differences

Cultural differences are one of the most overlooked and underestimated points to consider when organizing a collection outside of the U.S. Here are a few examples:

- In the US and northern Europe, business hours are very similar. However, in countries such as Spain, business hours may be between 10 am and 2 pm, close for lunch until 5 pm, and re-open again until 8 pm.
- In France, only a medical doctor can make the decision for a collection to take place. This means that you may need to contact the medical doctor prior to scheduling the collection just to determine whether the site will perform the collection.
- In countries like Turkey, you will need to have collection site with separate entrances for Western and non-Western collections. In addition, you will need to ensure that gender appropriate collectors are available (male collectors for male donors; female collectors for female donors)

Time difference and holiday vacations

US-based companies will sometimes have problems with getting contact with Europe, Middle East, and Australia/NZ because of the time difference. The time window to contact someone in Europe is just a few hours each day if you are based on the east coast. If you are based on the west coast, the 9 hour time difference makes it nearly impossible to contact a collection site by phone during regular business hours. In these cases, the use of email may be the best option to communicate with the collection provider. However, in many countries, the use of email can be very limited. So even if email is an improvement it may not help all the time. This is where having an intermediate in Europe may help. Since Europe is centrally located between Asia and the US, having someone who can contact sites within normal business hours is a benefit.

In Northern Europe vacation period starts in July and many offices close down for the most of the month; this makes communicating with collection providers very difficult and can cause delays in getting collections done. In Southern Europe the vacation period starts in August and the same situation would apply there. So for two months, it may be difficult to arrange a collection within Europe.

Laws

Laws and regulations vary from one country to another. As stated previous, countries like France have laws pertaining to who can decide whether a drug test (medical check) is required or not. Other countries like China require that positive results be reported to a special agency in the Public Security Bureau. In some countries it is only medical staff who is allowed to do a collection and receive the test result. Not many countries in the world outside USA mention the words “drug test” in the laws which can make it difficult to know what you can do or not do. You may get several totally different answers if you ask about drug tests depending on who answers.

Europe is currently drafting guidelines for the collection of urine, oral fluid and hair specimens, similar to those in the U.S. They will be translated in to several European languages when they are approved and published. If you are unsure about the laws and regulations for a particular country, it would be best to contact a representative of the local government for clarification.

Not common – no one did it before

In some geographical areas, the concept of drug testing is rare or has never been done before. In these locations, perception for the need for a drug test can be very low. The collection sites may not understand the difference between a standard medical test and a drug test. If only one test per year or just a few are performed, the chance of errors may be significant. This may also lead to the perception that it is not worth the time and effort for a medical provider to perform collections. If you are a certified or accredited medical site or a laboratory it can be difficult to defend the financial investment needed to write new procedures and train staff on collection procedures.

Money and currencies

Costs of collections outside of the U.S. are generally more expensive, as it is still a low volume business. This is because of the time and effort put into locating a collection site, sending out the materials, training the collectors,

and transporting the specimens to the laboratory. Add to this on top of paying the invoice for the collection and transportation, which includes costs for currency exchange and money transferring, and you can see how the cost of a single collection can mount.

One single collection can include several currencies: one for paying for the collection, one for the courier and one for the laboratory, and the client may wish all the costs invoiced in US\$.

Urine, oral fluid and hair collections

Urine is by far the most common type of specimen collection, even outside USA. Oral fluid and hair testing are increasing and, as mentioned above, there are draft guidelines in Europe for oral fluid and hair. In Australia the use of oral fluid has increased greatly and is used in roadside testing. With the new international regulations in the aviation sector, the use of oral fluid is now growing. But for now, it is still significantly more difficult to find a collection site that can provide an oral fluid collection or a hair collection than a urine collection. This will slowly change and can be seen in cities such as Stockholm, Sweden or downtown London, where collection sites routinely perform urine, hair, oral fluid and even blood collections for various drugs of abuse testing.

Countries with experience in collection

There are many countries where it is easier to arrange a collection than other. Example of these countries are;

- North and South America – Canada, Mexico, Caribbean, Brazil
- Western Europe – UK, Ireland, Netherlands, Hungary, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany
- Scandinavia - Sweden, Finland
- Asia, Singapore, India, Japan, Australia/New Zealand
- Africa, South Africa.

Countries where it is challenging to arrange collections

There are countries such as China and Russia where collections are politically difficult to arrange. Other countries where the logistics may be difficult are Italy and France.