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Underage Athletes Illegal Activity and the Ethical Responsibilities of the Team Physician

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A 17 year old male soccer player reports to the ATC during a soccer game requesting an inhaler due to chest pain and shortness of breath. Shortly after, he was absent from school for nearly a week, only to return without a clearance note. At the request of the team physician, he presented a note from a children's hospital almost 100 miles from where he lived, stating he was cleared for "return to work without restriction." When asked for a return to soccer note as well as documentation of his recent children's hospital visit, he presented a generic note from this same hospital for soccer clearance. It became known he suffered an E-cigarette or Vaping Product Use-Associated Lung Injury (EVALI) due to vaping marijuana. As there was only one soccer game left, he was a senior, and had medical clearance, the matter was not pursued. After the season he was nervous to talk as he "did not want to get into trouble." Due to the school's no drug policy, consequences could have included suspension or dismissal from the soccer team. The team doctor met with the school's principal, athletic director, athletic trainer, and the athlete's mother in an informal manner without intent for disciplinary action. After the decision was made that the athlete could speak freely and without consequence, he admitted that he had been smoking marijuana for over a year. The events and timeline surrounding his vaping injury and hospitalization were revealed in that meeting. Because he was afraid to come forward with his diagnosis, he returned to play without any medical guidance.

There is little guidance for how to act when one becomes aware of illegal activity of an athlete. There is a grey area between protecting confidentiality and the doctor-patient relationship and protecting the wellbeing of our athletes and organization. Although they were cleared for play by a medical professional, is a note from a distant hospital sufficient? Do we have a right to require medical records before accepting a clearance note? If there is a conflict between a conduct policy violation and the wellbeing of the athlete, how do we navigate this situation?

Sports medicine can present complicated and ethical challenges. It is important to recognize these difficult situations and discuss the events to be better prepared to care for our athletes and represent our organizations.