Drug screening in clinical or forensic toxicology: are there differences?

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Legal and medical practitioners need to remember that, with respect to drug analysis, there are two distinct disciplines in analytical toxicology concerned with human biological matrices, namely clinical and forensic toxicology. Both fields use similar analytical techniques designed to detect and quantify drugs, chemicals and poisons in fluids or tissues. In clinical toxicology, analytical results help to specify the appropriate treatment of a poisoned or intoxicated patient. In forensic toxicology, the results often play a vital role in determining the possible impairment or behavioural changes in an individual, or the contribution of drugs or poisons to death in a medico-legal investigation. This column provides an overview of the similarities and differences inherent in clinical and forensic toxicology.