

More drivers test for drugs than drink

Ben Cubby, The Sydney Morning Herald, May 16, 2007

Almost three times as many NSW drivers have tested positive to illegal drugs as those caught with alcohol in their systems, a new police random drug testing unit has found.

Of the 1600 drivers stopped and given a swab test by the unit since it was established in January, one in 46 were discovered to have taken illegal drugs.

In some areas, one in eight long haul truck drivers tested were caught using illegal drugs, chiefly amphetamines.

By comparison, random breath testing catches one driver in 130 for driving over their alcohol limit.

The program's success comes despite delays in setting up the testing unit, which has been criticised by the NSW Opposition for being under-resourced, and carrying out only 15 tests a week in its early days.

Police admit the numbers may be distorted because the drug unit - consisting of a single unmarked van staffed by eight officers - targeted truck routes and entertainment districts where they expected to find a high proportion of drug users on the road.

Superintendent John Hartley, the traffic services commander, said the drug unit's high strike rate was explained in part by the locations where testing took place, based on intelligence from local area commands.

"The fact is we are targeting areas where we know people are [taking drugs] so it might be distorted by that," Superintendent Hartley told Channel Ten.

"We are targeting drivers that might make the road unsafe and who might kill."

After amphetamines such as speed - favoured by some truck drivers to keep them awake - ecstasy and cannabis were popular among drivers.

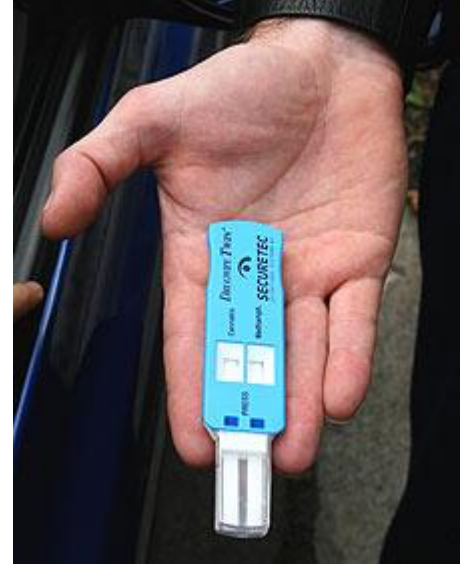
The tests take the form of a mouth swab, which is processed on site in the police van, taking about five minutes.

If it shows a positive result, a second test is taken inside the vehicle. If necessary police can detain drivers and order them to undergo a blood test in a hospital.

A police spokesman said two more random drug testing units are under construction and would be rolled out later this year, and more standard patrol cars would be fitted with testing kits within 18 months.

In 2006, before the testing van came online, 970 NSW drivers tested positive for drugs, but that figure is expected to rise markedly with the advent of the new unit.

Random breath testing for alcohol was introduced in 1982. Since then, fatal crashes involving alcohol have dropped from 40 per cent of all fatalities to 19 per cent.



Last year, 3.4 million random breath tests were carried out in NSW. "These results, over four months of testing, show that our roadside drug testing laws are working," the NSW Police Minister, David Campbell, said.

Source: <http://www.drive.com.au/Editorial/ArticleDetail.aspx?ArticleID=39566&vf=1>