

Are you impaired? The answer's in your eyes

By NED B. HUNTER
nhunter@jacksonsun.com

Madison County corrections officers have a new weapon in their battle against illegal-drug use that saves county money and helps protect case workers.

Adult convicted felons reporting to the corrections department for illegal-drug testing are subjected to a pre-screening test that can determine if a person is impaired, often eliminating the need for a urine-based drug test.

The pre-screening tool is the MCJ EyeCheck Pupillometer. When someone stares at the red cross-hairs inside a set of black, rubber goggles connected to a laptop computer, the pupillometer tests the pupil's response to the light and can determine if a person is impaired, said John Dal Santo, president of MCJ and the EyeCheck's co-inventor.

The machine does not show whether a person is using drugs, only whether their nervous system is impaired from something such as fatigue, an illegal drug or an over-the-counter medication. If the EyeCheck shows that someone is impaired, a urine test then is administered to determine what caused the impairment.

The eye-testing machine makes its decision based on the movements and size of the pupil.

"When you go to a doctor's office, he sometimes shines a flashlight in your eyes," Dal Santo said. "He is looking for the way the pupil reacts, an anomaly, which tells him something may be wrong."

An anomaly is an abnormality, according to Webster's New World College Dictionary.

Dal Santo and his co-inventor and business partner, Judi Gerstein, spent six years scanning and collecting pupil data from more than 120,000 Hispanic, black, Asian and Caucasian subjects to collect the computer data needed to determine if someone is impaired or simply fatigued.

"We are still scanning people because there are always new drugs out there," Gerstein said.

The pupillometer cost Madison County about \$8,000, Dal Santo said. It was paid for with a grant, according to Robert Anderson, director of the Madison County Department of Community Corrections.

The pupillometer saved the county about \$630 in urine-



ANDREW McMURTRIE /The Jackson Sun

Robert Anderson, director of the Madison County Department of Community Corrections, looks through the MCJ EyeCheck Pupillometer, an electronic pre-screening test that can determine if a person is impaired.



ANDREW McMURTRIE /The Jackson Sun

Marcus Jones, left, and Clint Merley, both case officers with the Madison County Corrections Office, demonstrate the MCJ EyeCheck Pupillometer.

based drug screening fees in May alone.

The county screens approximately 200 felons and other possible drug users each month, Anderson said. If just 50 percent, or 100, of those felons tested do not have to have a urine test, which cost \$17.50 each, the county could save \$21,000 in drug-test fees annually.

The pupillometer also keeps corrections officers from being exposed to medical risks from unnecessary urine-based drug testing. That's because state law requires a corrections officer to be in the room with the test subject when the sample is given.

"This eliminates us being in the room with someone with hepatitis or AIDS or who is HIV positive when it is unnecessary," Anderson said.

Unlike the urine test, the pupillometer cannot be fooled, said Marcus Jones, a caseworker for the county.

"If they (test subjects) know a urine test is coming, they can take stuff to flush their system out," he said. "So far, they have not found a way to cheat this test."

On the Net:

www.mcjeyechek.com

Visit jacksonsun.com and share your thoughts.

- Ned Hunter, 425-9641

Originally published June 26, 2006