Drug Screening From a Fingerprint

Could a new fingerprint drug test help combat drug use in prisons? Dr Paul Yates writes

rug screening within prisons supports a range of initiatives aimed at reducing drug use by inmates, but existing drug tests are often costly and difficult to administer.

Drug use is a major problem in the prison system. As many as one in three prisoners test positive in random drug screens (1) and 16 *per cent* admit to using drugs at least once a week (2).

In 2012, the Home Affairs Committee recognized the vital role of drug screening in combating drug misuse in prisons. It called for a more extensive approach to prison drug screening in order to evaluate the effectiveness of current systems aimed at tackling drug misuse and to identify prisons with serious drugs problems (3).

Conventional drug testing methods are hampered by the need to collect samples of body fluid such as urine or saliva for analysis. Such samples can be difficult and time-consuming to obtain, particularly if the prisoner is unwilling or unable to cooperate. Body fluids represent a biohazard so collection staff must be specially trained to carry out the testing. Collection areas need to be prepared and special facilities must be in place for the safe disposal of hazardous waste. These requirements add up to an expensive and inconvenient process which can hinder rather than support a prison's drug screening programme.

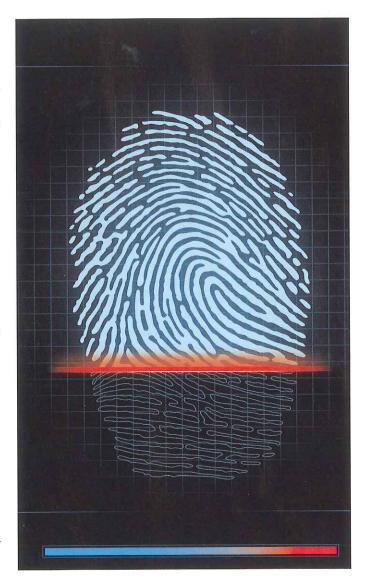
Everything could change, however, with the invention of a new fingerprint-based drug screening technique. British company, Intelligent Fingerprinting, has developed the first handheld drug screening device which detects drug use through fingerprint analysis.

The device is wholly non-invasive, so it is quick and simple to use. A fingerprint sample is obtained by asking the donor to press their fingertip onto a small collection receptacle. The sample is placed into the analysis device which then performs a multiple drug screen in less than 10 minutes.

Greater Protection From False Positives

The device has the option of capturing an image of each fingerprint sample and this can be used to identify the sample donor.

This feature is critical for establishing a chain of evidence and also for protecting the donor from false positives which may arise with conventional testing methods if samples get mixed up.



Easier Random Screening for Effective Drug Misuse Deterrent

Critics of mandatory drug testing say it is not truly "random" and that it is constrained by resources (4). This is unsurprising considering the preparations required for conventional drug screening. Random, unannounced drug screening is easier to implement using fingerprints.

The portable analysis device can be used anywhere and at any time without the need for specially prepared sample collection areas.

Fingerprints can be screened immediately or stored securely in individual collection receptacles for later analysis by the device. No special storage or transportation facilities are needed for samples.

Helping to Tackle Diverted Medication

There has been growing concern about prescribed medication within prisons being "diverted" from its intended use and sold to other prisoners (5).

Investigating and deterring this activity can be difficult with conventional drug tests because of the need for pre-planned collections of body fluid samples. In contrast, the Intelligent Fingerprinting test would enable on-the-spot screening of samples collected on suspicion to detect those individuals involved and to create an effective deterrent against drug diversion in the first instance.

Improved Prisoner Reception and Prescribing Services

Delays in receiving prisoner information files often necessitate a drug screen upon a prisoner's arrival. This test can be critical in ensuring a drug-dependent prisoner receives the correct treatment until such time as their official records arrive. In these circumstances, fingerprint drug screening may offer a convenient method of identifying the drugs a prisoner is using. The test's ability to analyse to different cut-off levels means that information about the amount of drugs being taken may also be estimated.

The introduction of a fingerprint-based drug test could undoubtedly assist the prison service to extend its drug screening initiatives and gather reliable data regarding the scope of drug-use in prisons. The new technique provides a non-invasive solution which is cost-effective and convenient to deploy at very short notice, offering clear benefits over conventional body-fluid-based drug testing.

References

- (1) HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, Report on HMP Durham (2011)
- (2) Policy Exchange, Coming Clean: Combating Drug Misuse in Prisons (January 2010)
- (3) Home Affairs Committee, Drugs: Breaking the Cycle (December 2012)
- (4) Policy Exchange, Coming Clean: Combating Drug Misuse in Prisons (January 2010)
- (5) HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, Annual Report 2012-13.

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