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B.C. Corrections using 'truth verification' device to screen job applicants

The B.C. Corrections branch is a big believer in the Computerized Voice Stress Analyzer, a device that purports to be able to detect deception by measuring modulations in the subject's voice.

CVSA tests are mandatory for anybody applying for a correctional officer job at a provincial custody centre.

The tests are conducted by ITV Consulting Inc., a Victoria company run by former Saanich police detectives Don Wiebe and Bob Wall. During the last three years, ITV has conducted 645 tests for the branch. The firm charges \$250 to \$300 per test.

The corrections branch says it uses the CVSA device as part of its screening process: "There are multiple steps in B.C. Corrections' screening process for new employees and the CVSA interview is intended to complement those other steps," it stated in an email.

But a letter of recommendation provided to ITV in May 2006 by Tedd Howard, then warden of the Prince George Regional Correction Centre, indicates that the device has been instrumental in deciding who is hired, and who is not.

During the previous year, he stated, ITV had tested 52 prospective employees: "Of the 52 applicants, 16 were screened out as unsuitable that would otherwise have been hired.

"The CVSA test results indicated deception and criminal activity omissions including such things as use of illegal substances, solicitation of prostitution, sex offences, acts of violence, as well as a myriad of theft, fraud and trafficking offences."

Problem is, equating voice stress with deception is a dicey theory. Most credible studies show voice stress analyzers are no more effective than flipping a coin. A 2007 field study funded by the U.S. Department of Justice used two voice stress analyzers systems -including the one used by ITV consulting -to quiz people who had just been arrested about their recent drug use, then compared their answers with the results of urine tests.

"The programs were not able to detect deception at a rate any better than chance," the study concluded. The study found, however, that subjects were less likely to lie about their drug use if they thought the device could actually detect lies. This is known as the "bogus pipeline effect," and may, in fact, be the device's only utility.

Offsetting this utility, however, is the prospect of incriminating -and disqualifying -an innocent applicant.

Several posters on Officer.com, an online discussion group for U.S. law enforcement officers, claim they were unfairly disqualified by CVSA tests.

"I failed a CVSA a few months back," one poster stated in February 2008. "I spiked on 'Have you ever used Cocaine?' Funny thing is, I have NEVER used any illegal narcotics. It DQ'd [disqualified] me." Wiebe insists that no applicant is disqualified on the basis of a CVSA test unless there is corroborating evidence, but posters on Officer.com have heard this sort of assurance before:

"You cannot be DQ'd strictly for not passing a polygraph or CVSA," one poster advised. "They are strictly tools to be used to support what has already been found or point where to look. If they told you that you are DQ'd based on the test alone you may want to bring up the Federal Protection Act."

To which another poster replied: "The problem is they never do DQ you for the test alone, they always give you an answer like, 'Due to issues arising from your background investigation.'"

Lorna Fadden, a Vancouver expert in forensic linguistics, said she is "disturbed that provincial agencies would use this device."

Fadden completed her doctorate in forensic linguistics in 2008, and has taught at SFU and the B.C. Justice Institute. She also consults for law enforcement agencies and legal counsel on cases involving language evidence.

"There is no actual proven correlation between vocal stress and telling a truth or lie," she told me in an email this week.

"Even if there were, there are simply too many factors to foul up reliable results. What might be viewed as voice stress might actually be due to pathological speech, natural or medication-induced tremor, illicit narcotics and so on. For all we know, a mild case of hay fever could interfere with vocal stress."

She concluded: "No product, method or technique that has the potential to alter the course of someone's life should be on the market without rigorous testing." On its website, ITV claims that clinical studies show the device, used in conjunction with the "expert interrogation techniques used and taught by ITV," is 98-per-cent accurate "with no inconclusives."

But neither ITV, nor the National Institute of Truth Verification -the Florida company that licenses the technology to ITV and makes the same boast -can produce an independent study to back up this assertion.

Fadden dismisses their claim as "preposterous. The polygraph is probably the best we have, but there is darn good reason it's not admissible in court, either." Despite its dubious accuracy, the device has proved to be popular, particular after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

NITV claims the CVSA device "is used by 1,800 local, state and federal agencies," but it doesn't name the agencies, which makes this figure impossible to confirm.

NITV also claims the device is used by "U.S. Military Special Operations and Intelligence units." However, the U.S. Department of Defense prohibited the use of voice stress analyzers in 2005. "Merely getting people to talk is not sufficient," Robert Rogalski, Acting Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Counterintelligence and Security), explained in a March 2006 letter to the American Spectator.

"That information must be assessed for accuracy and truthfulness. . Until scientific testing adequately proves the reliability and accuracy of CVSA, the Department of Defense would be irresponsible to condone the acquisition of such an instrument." Rogalski noted that researchers at the University of Florida had just completed a study of voice stress analysis "and we await the opportunity to review that study."

Within days, that study was released. It concluded that "neither CVSA nor [a similar device] showed any sensitivity to the presence of deception or stress." Despite all these concerns, CVSA tests are being routinely administered in B.C. In addition to the corrections branch, the University of Victoria uses the device to screen security personnel; the Saanich and Oak Bay police forces use it to screen prospective police recruits; and sundry financial institutions use it to ferret out malfeasance.