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Police Hoping Drug Scanner is Narcotics Game Changer

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By [DEVLIN BARRETT](#)

Police in a few departments around the U.S. are testing a hand-held laser device that its boosters say can immediately identify illegal drugs and could revolutionize how narcotics cases are investigated and prosecuted.

Proponents hope the device, called TruNarc, will help officers quickly discern illicit substances at a time when police are seeing a surge in new, harder-to-identify designer drugs such as the psychoactive powders known as "bath salts."

Paul Keenan, chief of police in Quincy, Mass., said his detectives have been using it for months alongside traditional drug-testing kits.

"It's cop-proof. It's rugged, dependable and easy to use," said Chief Keenan. He compared the potential impact of the device to breath analyzers used on suspected drunken drivers, which allow street cops to produce data routinely accepted in court. Breathalyzers have led to a greater percentage of guilty pleas and fewer trials in drunken-driving cases, reducing police and court costs, he said.



Associated Press

Patrick Glynn, of Quincy, Mass., police, with a TruNarc drug scanner and, in bag, what it identified as cocaine.

Traditional drug kits are used by police to justify initial arrest and further investigation, but courts require laboratory testing if a case gets that far. Although judges have yet to rule on whether TruNarc data is admissible in court, Quincy is employing the device in all its narcotics cases, in hopes that judges will start accepting the

results. TruNarc relies on a technology, called Raman spectroscopy, that is already used in many drug labs.

The device "will take away a lot of the gamesmanship between arrest and trial," said Chief Keenan. Some drug-testing experts, however, see a smaller impact, saying TruNarc results aren't likely to be admitted in court. TruNarc's price of nearly \$20,000 per unit also may be too steep for cash-strapped departments.

Joseph Bozenko, a clandestine-laboratory coordinator for the Drug Enforcement Administration, uses a Raman-spectroscopy device in drug labs around the world. He said the newer versions of the technology are getting "rave reviews" from his colleagues in the field, but cautioned that the issue is more complicated than just shrinking lab equipment to a portable size and using it in the street or police station.

The Long War

Drug arrests have almost tripled over the past decades.

Total estimated U.S. arrests for drug-law violations



Source: U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics
The Wall Street Journal

"That technology is in no way a substitute for full routine analysis and a certified laboratory setting," said Mr. Bozenko. "I would not go to court based on a test I ran in a clandestine laboratory in the middle of a mountain crime scene."

Other experts say it is risky to put lab technology in the hands of law-enforcement officers without a background in science.

TruNarc was developed by [Thermo Fisher Scientific Inc.](#), [TMO_+1.17%](#) based in Waltham, Mass. The Quincy police department bought three of the devices. Police in Boston, Chicago and Los Angeles also have been trying the device.

Raman spectroscopy throws a small laser light at a substance. Each chemical compound scatters that light in a slightly different pattern, and the device then compares the pattern with those in its library to identify the substance. Such testing is routinely part of crime lab work, but only recently has it been developed in such a portable way for use in the field.

TruNarc's price tag is far higher than the \$10 or \$20 it costs to buy a one-time test kit of the kind police around the country have been using for years. Those kits typically involve mixing a suspected drug with a small amount of chemical.

Such kits, however, test for a single type of drug, and destroy the sample. So, an officer can use up the evidence while trying to figure out what a suspicious powder is. TruNarc can work on a sample half the size of a grain of rice without destroying it, Thermo Fisher Scientific says, though Mr. Bozenko said dark substances like tar heroin can catch fire from the heat of the laser light of such devices.

Thermo Fisher Scientific said no fires should occur if TruNarc is used carefully and according to instructions.

Another TruNarc advantage, the company says, is that its digital library of chemical compounds can easily be updated as new substances hit the streets.

On a February afternoon in Quincy, plainclothes detectives watched a man they deemed suspicious walk across a Pizza Hut parking lot. The man got into the passenger side of a red pickup truck, spent about 30 seconds inside, then got out, according to a police report.

When detectives rushed toward him, the suspect, David Aiello, tried to run, according to the report. He allegedly threw something from his pocket. On the ground nearby, police recovered a baggie with 40 blue tablets. The drug looked like oxycodone, an addictive painkiller that is illegal to sell on the street. A TruNarc test at the police station identified it as oxycodone.

Mr. Aiello's lawyer didn't return repeated calls for comment. Mr. Aiello has pleaded not guilty to charges including possession of drugs with intent to distribute. A trial is tentatively scheduled for later this month.

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For Information on the TruNarc visit www.warsash.com.au/HAZMAT-chemical-id/#trunarc