Oral Fluid Drug Testing at the Roadside: a Game Changer

When Sgt. Eddie Bowers first started pulling over impaired drivers in 2000, the great majority were for alcohol abuse. Back then there was no practical way to perform drug testing at the roadside. All that changed in 2009 when his department began to use the Dräger DrugTest® 5000, the leading oral fluid drug testing device.

THE EVOLUTION OF ROADSIDE IMPAIRMENT CHECKS
Roadside drug test technology has come a long way since Sgt. Bowers first started making impairment arrests in 2000. "Back then, drug recognition experts carried around urine test kits – that was the only thing out there for us to use. But it's just not reasonable on any level to request a driver, while in public view, to submit to a urine test. So it wasn't until the advent of oral fluid testing that we had a viable tool to help us combat drugged driving."

Sgt. Bowers continues, "My department started using the Dräger DrugTest® 5000 in 2009 and I will tell you from my own personal experience that it is an absolute game changer. Before then, the lion's share of my DUIs was for alcohol, and every now and then I'd come across a marijuana DUI that was very distinguishable from the unmistakable odor. The first month I started using the DrugTest 5000 oral fluid machine, I arrested twelve people for DUI. Two of them were for alcohol. The other ten were all DUI drug cases – every one of them tested positive for some type of drug on the Dräger DrugTest 5000."

“The Dräger DrugTest 5000 is absolutely brilliant for field work.”
Sergeant Eddie Bowers

ABOUT SGT. BOWERS
Sergeant Eddie Bowers has been a law enforcement officer in the state of Nevada since 2000. He received field sobriety test training at the Police Academy and through the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration curriculum.

In 2007, Sgt. Bowers became a field sobriety test instructor and in 2013 a field sobriety test instructor trainer. He also participated in the Advanced Roadside Impaired Driving Enforcement (ARIDE) course on how to evaluate drug-impaired drivers.

Sgt. Bowers currently teaches standardized field sobriety testing at the Police Academy and conducts seminars at the National Judicial College on field sobriety testing and technology.
Sgt. Bowers believes that if marijuana legalization continues to gain traction across the country, more and more people will be using it. “A device like the Dräger DrugTest 5000 is going to be an increasingly important tool at the roadside so we can tell on the spot if the driver has been using marijuana.”

Sgt. Bowers adds, “There is also an epidemic in this country of prescription medication abuse. And it’s not just in the very bad neighborhoods or the nefarious parts of town. This is everywhere – this is in the suburbs.” The Dräger DrugTest 5000 helps in those cases because it tests for seven different narcotics.

“If you stop the soccer mom with kids in the car and her speech is thick and slow and she says she is overly tired from being up all night with a sick child, it’s very important that I do not send this mom down the road with perhaps everything that is important to her in life – her children in the car – if she were impaired. I now have the ability to find out if a driver is abusing their medication.”

NON-INVASIVE AND UNINTIMIDATING

Sgt. Bowers considers the Dräger DrugTest easy to use and unintimidating to suspects. To collect an oral sample, Sgt. Bowers hands the test cassette to the suspect and asks them to hold it inside their mouth for about a minute to a minute and a half. “You put the cassette into the machine, turn it on, and it does the rest. The only thing the officer has to do is to type in information when the device asks for it – such as the suspect’s name, birthday, a case number if that is desired, the test location, and so forth.

“The DrugTest 5000 is elegant in its simplicity. The face of the device has three buttons: an arrow up, a down arrow and a power on button. You can’t get much simpler than that. It’s what we call ‘cop proof,’” says Sgt. Bowers with a laugh. “The Dräger DrugTest 5000 is absolutely brilliant for field work.”

How many people have refused to provide a saliva sample? “Since 2009 when I started using this machine, I have not had anybody refuse me. And I’ve tested hundreds of people.”

The DrugTest 5000 can also be used to test substances found in a car. “If an officer finds some sort of white powdery substance inside a vehicle, they might wonder, ‘Is this cocaine? Is this methamphetamine?’ It’s not like on TV where they taste it and say ‘Yeah, it’s cocaine.’ We do not do that. So it’s extremely valuable that with the Dräger DrugTest 5000, you can place a sample of the unknown substance onto another test cassette, place it inside the machine, and it’ll tell you what type of narcotic it is.”
PROVEN RELIABILITY FROM A TRUSTED BRAND
Sgt. Bowers was familiar with the Dräger brand before he started using the DrugTest 5000. “My agency had been using Dräger preliminary breath testers for alcohol. And when the officers started using those – again, it was a game changer. The Dräger Alcotest PBT was the most reliable preliminary breath tester we had ever used. It would capture a puff of breath from a subject that was perhaps being evasive when they were submitting to the test. The results were very reliable when measured against an evidentiary breath test later on at the jail. So we had a high opinion of Dräger devices and when we saw the availability of an oral fluid tester, we thought ‘Let’s give it a shot. If it’s made by Dräger, it’s likely going to perform very well.’”

When it comes to reliability, the Dräger DrugTest 5000 earns high marks. Sgt. Bowers explains, “We’ve participated in some correlative studies where an oral fluid sample was taken and tested by the Dräger DrugTest 5000, a secondary sample was captured and sent to NMS Labs in Pennsylvania, and then the arrested subject was eventually taken to jail and submitted to an evidentiary test of their blood or urine. We had three pieces of data to look at and all of them married together perfectly – which shows that the reliability of the Dräger DrugTest 5000 is profound.”

MAKING A CASE
Sgt. Bowers continues, “The results of the Dräger DrugTest 5000 are extremely relevant when you are making a probable cause determination to make a seizure order for someone’s blood.”

Once he has collected a saliva sample and inserted the test cassette into the Dräger DrugTest 5000 to run the test, Sgt. Bowers goes back and tells the driver what he suspects them of using. “I might say, ‘The test that you just submitted to is going to show whether or not you have used any of seven different types of narcotics – and marijuana is one of them.’ Or ‘Methamphetamine is one of them.’ And that’s usually enough to get people to be pretty forthcoming and say, ‘Well, I did use some marijuana’ or other drug.” In Nevada, audio and video recording devices are used in all patrol vehicles.

“Now, we have built our case with their driving, their signs and symptoms in field sobriety testing, their admission to usage, and – the corner piece of the puzzle – the Dräger DrugTest 5000, which gives us very reliable roadside test results.”

Back at the station, the coordinator can plug a USB cable into the DrugTest 5000 and download all the test data onto a hard drive on a desktop computer, so the data is always available. “All of the relevant questions that a defense attorney would ask are contained in this database, and you can print out a PDF or Excel file if you need paper documentation.”

A DEVICE TO HELP SAVE LIVES
Sgt. Bowers summarizes the mission of his profession – which also happens to be his personal passion. “Law enforcement officers are the front line of defense out there in creating a safe environment for people to operate their vehicles on highways. We do that by changing drivers’ behaviors through aggressive enforcement of traffic laws. One of the most profound impacts we can have toward saving lives is arresting impaired drivers, and the Dräger DrugTest 5000 is a piece of technology that can help us do just that. It can help us save lives.”
Dräger DrugTest is a trademark of Dräger.