

that basis, and that basis alone, you are supposed to vote in favor of paying higher taxes to provide the poor with medical insurance and child care that you will not be able to afford yourself. No wonder the women in my grocery store aren't Democrats. No wonder they hate government programs in general and welfare in particular. They know they are expected to fend for themselves. They know they can't afford to do that and help fund welfare, too.

In the meantime, of course, there is not only no universal health insurance plan in place but none in sight, and there isn't

likely to be one as long as the Republicans are in the majority. My husband will have to go on lying to the pediatrician. I will have to go on wondering how we're ever going to be able to keep paying for those antibiotics. And all up and down my middle-class street, people will not get the medical care they need or the education that could help them better themselves or the child care that would enable them to work full-time because, in spite of all the calculations on all the pieces of paper in all the government aid offices in America that say they should be able to afford these things, real life has shown them that they can't. ■

ONE COMPANY TOUTS A PAIR OF SCISSORS AS THE NEWEST WEAPON IN THE DRUG WAR—BUT RESEARCHERS URGE CAUTION

Mom and Pop Test for Drugs

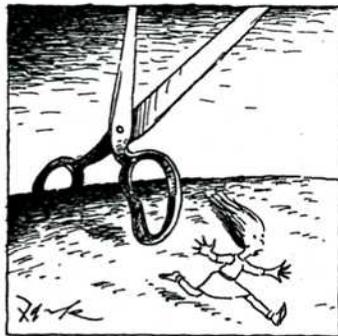
MARK FRANKEL

With no sign that drug use is waning, a Massachusetts company is promising to provide a quick fix for those who think rigorous monitoring is an answer. The Psychemedics Corporation of Cambridge has begun selling anxious parents a no-muss, no-fuss way to test their kids for drug use without ever leaving their home.

Introduced last July, the firm's PDT-90 Personal Drug Testing Service was unveiled with a fear-mongering newspaper ad headlined "An Open Letter to the Parents of America," which deftly played upon parental dread. ("Even if you do everything right, your child might still try drugs. A third of eighth graders in the U.S. has used drugs. One-half of twelfth graders has," it read in part.) Parents were invited to call Psychemedics's toll-free number to order one of the \$75 test packets. For their cash, they received a company-supplied envelope, along with instructions on how to clip and deposit a small lock of their child's hair inside it, to be mailed for analysis at Psychemedics's lab in Culver City, California. The company has patented a technique that it claims can detect evidence of drug use by analyzing no more than four or five dozen strands of hair. Within a few weeks' time, Psychemedics promises to provide a confidential report on its test results.

Fear sells. Psychemedics executives refuse to say how many PDT-90 packets they have peddled so far, but company president Raymond Kubacki says the initial response has been "overwhelming" for a product still in the early stages of test-marketing. He is particularly upbeat about the reaction generated by direct-mail ads that were sent to 13,000 high school drug counselors.

Pushing aside the obvious civil liberties concerns for a moment, there's another reason parents should hesitate before grabbing the nearest shears and asking their kids to please step into the bathroom. "Hair testing is not always correct, nor a perfect measure," says Dr. Edward Cone, chief of chemistry and drug metabolism at the Addiction Research Center in Baltimore, part



of the National Institutes of Health (N.I.H.). "There are a lot of problems that have not been fully explored or explained." The Food and Drug Administration has pointedly refused to approve the test method, having described it as "an unproven procedure unsupported by the scientific literature or well-controlled studies and clinical trials." The Society of Forensic Toxicologists has also refused to endorse it as a stand-alone test for drugs. And a Nevada judge ruled in 1990 that hair analysis alone "has not...developed sufficiently to form a basis for termination of current employees" for drug use. Urinalysis remains the legal and scientific standard for drug testing.

Ihat has not stopped Psychemedics's powerful backers and their political allies from lobbying assiduously for government approval. Nor has it prevented about 500 companies, including such household names as Blockbuster Entertainment, from relying upon Psychemedics's dubious hair testing to screen job applicants. "These guys don't know much about science, but they have done an incredible marketing job," says J. Michael Walsh, the former director of applied research at the National Institute for Drug Abuse (NIDA). At stake is a \$750 million market, which is now dominated by urinalysis labs.

Indeed, word last summer of PDT-90's rollout ignited a small stampede on Wall Street: Psychemedics's share price tripled to more than \$10 a share in only a few days. And in early November, Psychemedics teamed up with swaggering New Orleans District Attorney Harry Connick, who proposed employing Psychemedics to test the city's public high school students for drugs. Citing a recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling that permits drug testing of public school athletes, Connick proposed launching a one-year pilot program at two city high schools; if successful, hair testing would then be expanded to all 21,000 secondary students in the system. Appearing at a news conference with Connick, Kubacki said his company would underwrite the cost

of the pilot program. If a citywide program is implemented, however, parents could expect to pick up the \$50-per-pupil tab themselves.

Psychemedics has also lobbied for years to gain federal approval of hair testing in order to gain a share of lucrative government drug-testing contracts, according to several U.S. drug program administrators. Under the Reagan-era Drug Free Federal Workplace program, hundreds of thousands of U.S. government employees, as well as tens of thousands more in federally regulated industries such as railroads, are routinely subjected to drug testing. But under current guidelines issued by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHA), urinalysis is the only accepted method of drug testing. Walsh, who after leaving NIDA went on to be executive director of the President's Drug Advisory Council under George Bush, recalls an informal 1991 meeting with Tom O'Neill, son of the late Speaker of the House. O'Neill, who served as a Psychemedics lobbyist, asked how quickly the F.D.A. could certify hair testing if Psychemedics were to underwrite a crash program to validate the procedure scientifically. "He said dollars were no object in terms of [spending on the required lab work necessary for] F.D.A. approval," Walsh recalls. Walsh replied that the F.D.A.'s research would require at least two years.

Money, certainly, is one thing Psychemedics's wealthy backers do not lack. Since 1989, the company has been controlled by a small band of investors led by H. Wayne Huizenga, the multimillionaire founder of Waste Management Inc. and Blockbuster Entertainment. Huizenga is among the richest men in Florida. Nor has Huizenga been shy about calling on friendly politicians to nudge the federal bureaucracy. Among them have been Florida's former Governor Bob Martinez, who wrote a letter in April 1990 to the Secretary of Health and Human Services, Louis Sullivan, to push the certification process for Psychemedics. More recently, in a May 25, 1995, letter that reads like a Psychemedics press release, New York Representative Gerald Solomon urged Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala, whose department oversees SAMHA, to "bring outdated government regulations up to date" and revise guidelines to include hair testing.

The new drug test has roots in old science. It's long been common knowledge among pathologists (as well as readers of mystery novels) that minute traces of heavy metals like arsenic wind up in hair after ingestion. Working in Los Angeles in the late seventies, Dr. Werner Baumgartner, an Austrian-born chemist, reasoned that hair could also be utilized to screen for drugs. By breaking down hair proteins and using radioimmunoassay, Baumgartner claimed he could detect marijuana, cocaine, opiates, amphetamine or PCP in amounts as small as one-billionth of a gram.

Proponents of hair testing claim the technique has two great advantages over conventional urinalysis. First, it eliminates the dripping specimen cups and embarrassment that go along with "Fill this cup and leave it on the back of the toilet." Second, traces of most street drugs are purged from the body after only

'I WAS A PROPONENT OF HAIR TESTING UNTIL I STARTED LOOKING AT REPORTS,' SAID A RESEARCHER WHO FOUND COCAINE IN THE HAIR OF CHILDREN FROM HOUSES IN WHICH CRACK WAS SMOKED.

two or three days. Psychemedics, on the other hand, claims its hair-test methods provide a "window of detection" that will spot any drug use ninety days prior to testing. That sales line has proved irresistible to the more than 500 companies that have employed Psychemedics to screen their workers for drug use. Clients include the MGM Grand Hotel in Las Vegas, Steelcase Corporation and Harrah's casinos, though by far the largest single customer has been Blockbuster, the entertainment conglomerate Huizenga sold to Viacom in 1994.

While the Psychemedics executives insist that its tests are "100 percent accurate," that depends on whose research you read. Plenty of studies do not support such brimming confidence.

The biggest question mark is the precise mechanism by which cocaine is absorbed into the hair. While some traces are absorbed from the bloodstream, there's also evidence that cocaine might be absorbed by hair from sweat and sebum, the greasy coating produced by the scalp. In one study at the University of California, Davis, Medical School, the husband-and-wife team of Gary Henderson and Martha Harkey found significant levels of cocaine showing up in clean hair samples that had merely been handled by test subjects who had received measured doses of cocaine intravenously or intranasally. Thus it is difficult to determine whether hair has been externally contaminated or tainted by ingestion.

Anyone who has whiffed tobacco smoke in their hair hours after leaving a smoky cocktail party knows how readily hair traps airborne particles. Two-thirds of the thirty-five children (many of them age 8 or younger) living in homes in which crack was smoked routinely were found to have cocaine in their hair, according to a study conducted at the University of Alabama, Birmingham. Some of the kids had higher levels of drug residue in their hair than adults living under the same roof. "If one assumes that young children are not intentional cocaine users, these results show that their hair can become cocaine positive through passive exposure," concluded the study abstract. Fred Smith, a co-author of the study, says, "I was a proponent of hair testing until I started looking at reports." There's also some evidence that test results are skewed by the subject's race or gender. Animal research done at the Center for

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Human Toxicology at the University of Utah indicates that darkly pigmented hair containing high levels of melanin accumulates more cocaine residue than lighter colored hair. Lastly, another study by the center raises the possibility that women's hair might hold more drug residue than men's.

Kubacki insists that his firm has devised a special method of washing hair samples that removes any outside environmental contaminants, and notes that all positive test results are verified independently using chromatography/mass spectrometry as a backup to radioimmunoassay. He calls the Alabama study "specious" and says it has never been peer reviewed. Ironically, that's the same complaint that some outside researchers direct at Kubacki's company; they say that Psychomedics has never shared all its data freely so its test can be duplicated independently. Psychomedics's chief says such criticism is merely another sign of the powerful economic interests that are out to thwart his upstart company.

Until recently, Psychomedics has managed to operate without much regulatory scrutiny. It lies under the jurisdiction of an

obscure federal agency, the Health Care Finance Administration, which oversees medical testing labs. But the introduction of Psychomedics's PDT-90 service has set off alarms at the F.D.A. In a warning letter last August, the agency claimed that by peddling PDT-90 directly to consumers, the company had crossed over the regulatory line; specifically, it described the specimen envelope supplied by Psychomedics to consumers as an unapproved "medical device." The company was ordered to seek F.D.A. approval or face fines of up to \$15,000 for each packet sold. Psychomedics executives refuse to discuss the F.D.A.'s action directly; they released only a brief statement saying they believe the company is in compliance with the Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act and federal regulations. Even an F.D.A. spokeswoman admitted the agency employed the thinnest of legal technicalities against PDT-90. "The envelope might be the easiest way to get them off the market," she said. Yet considering the many well-founded doubts surrounding Psychomedics's claims of a forensic breakthrough, the agency might be forgiven this once for splitting a few hairs in the public interest. ■