

# Editorial

## Polygraph tests not reliable evidence

The Oregon Supreme Court should be commended for its decision to ban testimony gained from use of a polygraph machine in criminal trials. The lie detector tests are not a reliable source of information and can lead to incorrect decisions.

The court ruled that results of the tests cannot be admitted as evidence even if the prosecutor and the accused agree to their use. The decision stated the risk of potential misuse was high as well as a jury relying heavily on the results.

Polygraph machines chart a person's physical reactions to a series of questions. To this extent, they are vulnerable to the subject's control of his or her emotions. An article in Psychology Today described the machines not as lie detectors, but as anxiety detectors. "It does not detect lies, only fear, anxiety or anger associated with a question or an answer," the article said.

If a person is able to remain calm during the questioning the results can be interpreted differently. It also is possible to trick the machine by creating undue stress while answering the control question. The control question is a simple question such as "What is your name?" used to determine a lie or the truth. Interpreters then use the control question as a basis for judging answers to the remaining questions.

A common method subjects may use to trick the machine is to put a tack in their shoes. By rubbing their toes over the tack while answering the control question it creates and abnormal stress level and distorts the interpretation of the test.

Nonetheless, some claim the tests are up to 90 percent accurate. Dr. Stanley Abrams, a polygraph operator and psychologist in Portland, disagreed with the court's decision. He told the Oregonian that because of their accuracy polygraph test results should be admitted. "A person being accused should have the right to defend himself with any scientific means," he said.

But polygraphs can hardly be called scientific. The results of a test are very subjective and not only rely on how calm the subject is, but also on the person interpreting the chart.

Lincoln Zonn, who runs a Florida school for polygraphers, likened the polygraph to an X-ray. "The X-ray doesn't lie. It just depends on who reads it," he told Psychology Today.

The relativity of test results is further proven by studies that show varying accuracy rates. Leonard Saxe, an assistant professor of psychology at Boston University, reported accuracy rates ranging from 64 percent to 98 percent in six research reviews. Because the accuracy of a lie detector test is so indistinguishable, the results cannot be accepted as facts.

Unfortunately, many juries do not understand this, or it is not explained to them, and it can harm the outcome of a trial.

"Of greater concern even than the possibility of undue delay (of a trial) is the potential for misuse and overvaluation of the polygraph evidence by the jury," Justice J.R. Campbell wrote in the majority opinion.

The Oregon Supreme Court made a valid decision Tuesday. A person has the right to defend himself, but it should not be under false pretenses.



## Letters

### End in action

Wars don't end with words — they end with action. If the government intends to win the war against AIDS, its officials must enter the sordid world of heroin shooting galleries. Television and newspaper advertisements won't capture an impoverished audience.

The gay community has been thoroughly educating itself on the dangers of and protections from AIDS. Consequently, the rate of new AIDS infections among the high-risk group has dropped dramatically.

Intravenous drug users are another story. As a whole, the group lacks much formal education and needs to be persuaded to discontinue its high-risk behavior.

A high-tech media campaign isn't going to work. Let's face it, very few IV drug users are indulging in liquid sky at the dinner table while watching Dan Rather or reading the Los Angeles Times.

If the government is to succeed in an anti-AIDS project, its going to have to get its hands dirty. Government representatives must be willing to enter back alley ways and climb rot-

ted stairwells. That's where the target audience gets its next fix.

Michael P. O'Connor  
Journalism

### Criticism

I'm going to take this opportunity to respond to Blake Sliter's letter (ODE, Oct. 14). Blake, granted, you do have a right to express your views in this public forum. And granted, at times there are situations at the University that merit criticism. I applaud your exercising your rights; most people don't.

I have found some of your letters amusing and some annoying. And I have both agreed and disagreed with your viewpoints.

But I have to, at this point, clarify something. I don't care a bit about the petty Greek/non-Greek rivalry. I don't take part in the rampant, uninformed criticism directed at both sides; I leave that to others.

But your latest letter is, in my opinion, sick and as written, unnecessary. You complain of social inhumanity and barbarianism and then suggest as solutions examples of each.

So Blake, if you are going to criticize, use your ability to do so. But don't become the same

kind of hypocrite you've accused others of being.

I'd like to see space in the Emerald used in a thoughtful, constructive manner, rather than for vicious ventings of anger.

This is my personal view, and I'd appreciate that it be taken as the constructive criticism that it is meant to be.

Michael Dunn  
Senior

### Grow up

Last spring, University Vice President for Administration Dan Williams urged a group of students to raise the level of campus dialogue to a more mature and meaningful level.

He reminded us that the University student body has a tradition of student involvement which has engendered many valuable additions to the local and national social and political debate.

Many of this fall's initial spate of letters to the Emerald have convinced me that we have a long way to go in this area. Rather than battle over relatively unimportant issues which have no significance beyond the boundaries of this institution (the Greek/non-Greek fracas, for example), we need to recognize that we are the inheritors of a society filled with problems and opportunities, in the midst of massive social change, which is extremely influential among the nations of the earth.

Recognizing this, let's take some responsibility for our position — and grow up a little bit. I would hope that our generation could defy the "yuppie" label placed on us and distinguish ourselves by our compassion and concern for others.

I realize that these are lofty ideals, but they are attainable. We do, however, have a long way to go.

Randy MacDonald  
Political science  
Friday, October 16, 1987

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