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## Employee screening gets high tech

By BETH CHRISTIAN

Drug and alcohol abuse among employees is a great concern, especially in this new digital age where technology allows many ways to cheat and beat some screening.

A brand new state-of-the-art technology allows employers to test employees for the top five abused drugs at the click of the mouse and get results in as quick as 10 minutes, said Barry White of Coast Medical Examiners.

Escreen is the latest in drug screening technology, and it is much more accurate than more traditional sticks or swabs, White said. It is a five-panel system originally designed for the Wal-Mart Corporation.

Escreen currently is the only manufacturer of this first automated and instant clinic-based drug-testing machine, according to its Web site.

The technology tests for the use of marijuana and cocaine — the two most commonly abused drugs in the workplace, according to the National Drug-Free Workplace Alliance. It also tests for the presence of amphetamines, opiates and PCP, more commonly referred to as angel dust.

White, and CME's owner, his father Hal White, have been in business on the Coast for 17 years doing background checks for more than 75 companies coast wide.

"It's a nasty business, but there's a big demand," White said. "Since the storm, it's been much worse — many more positives and cheating."

White attributes this to the depression that many Coastians have experienced since Hurricane Katrina devastated Mississippi Aug. 29, 2005.

"People complain there are no jobs, but employees need people to work," White said.

But employers want to know they have good, reliable and drug-free people, too.

"Technology is better now," White said. The screen system is more than 98 percent accurate. All drugs are excreted from a person's body within two days except marijuana, which remains in the bloodstream 30 days. And marijuana is still the most abused drug, he said.

Another advantage of the escreen system, he said, is that the subjectivity of the examiner is not an issue.

"It's all Web based," White said. "An optical eye looks at it. This is so accurate.

A computer reads it. I don't read it."

The dipstick system was terribly inaccurate, he said, and a positive with that method won't even hold up in court in the state of Mississippi. Mississippi law states that a test using gas chromatography must be

used for evidence.

With escreen, anything that does not come back negative is returned for further testing, and it is sent for gas chromatography before it is confirmed positive for drug use.

"Gas chromatography breaks down the urine and tells exactly what's in it," White said.

Those 10-15 percent that escreen returns non-negative results on take between one and two days to go to the lab for gas chromatography testing.

"Escreen is the pioneer in drug screening in the country," White said.

Unfortunately, the second most popular trend — the mouth swab — is highly inaccurate, he said. It is cheaper, which is why many companies still use it.

"Saliva is not a good tester for narcotics because it is only accurate up to eight hours after drug use."

Resa Frey, manager of corporate employment and employee relations for Hancock Bank, said the bank drug screens and background checks all potential employees, including a credit check.

Hancock Bank, whose company headquarters is in Gulfport, employs 1,900 people in four states.

It is important to Hancock Bank that their employees can do their jobs without harming themselves or others and accurately work on the systems assigned them, Frey said.

She said they have very few applicants who test positive for drugs and use the escreen system, which she believes works well for the bank's needs.

Hancock Bank is required to run fingerprints of personnel through the FBI database because it is an FDIC insured company.

A credit check, done by fewer employers, is done by the bank, also.

"We look at credit as a sign of character," Frey said. "We look to make sure they are current on bills and we check references."

South Mississippi Regional Center in Long Beach also uses the escreen drug screening method to test its applicants.

Mike Letort, director of risk management, said it is Department of Mental Health policy to require drug screening and background checks on personnel, and he said the escreen system works fine.

"If a specimen is OK, I have the results in 10 minutes back in my office," Letort said. "It's fast unless there is a problem, and then it's forwarded to a lab. I don't know how it could be any better."

He said that South Mississippi Regional Center did not have much problem finding good employees, though, because most were referred by current employees, and they are well aware of the testing before they apply.

The center also does its own computerized fingerprint screening on site with a machine it owns.

"It's all computerized; it takes pictures, no ink" Letort said. They are run through the FBI and State of Mississippi database to check for criminal background record.

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