

Truth Sleuth or Faulty Detector?

Voice stress analyzer as polygraph alternative goes on trial

BY MARK HANSEN

"Police seem to like it (Voice stress analysers) because it produces the occasional confession, which saves them a lot of time and legwork," says Frank Horvath, a Michigan State University criminology professor who has studied lie detector technology for more than 30 years.

But the problem with voice stress analysis, according to Horvath and other critics, is that--beyond its handiness at eliciting confessions--it doesn't prove anything. Serious research shows that with voice stress analysis the lie detection rate is at "chance levels, the same as guessing," Horvath says. "There's no merit to it, whatsoever."

James Starrs, a professor of law and forensic sciences at George Washington University, dismisses voice stress analysis as junk science. "If you buy all the hype" about it, he says, "I have a bridge in Brooklyn I'd like to sell you."

Voice stress analysis has been around since the mid-1970s, when three retired Army intelligence officers developed a system they believed would be more effective than the polygraph.

The theory behind the device is that the voice emits inaudible vibrations called microtremors. Under stress, such as when a person lies, the vocal muscles tighten and the micro-tremors decrease, appearing as flattened lines on a computer screen. But doubts about its reliability have plagued the technology from the beginning and **no scientific research is available as prove to this theory.**

Wrongful Prosecution Allegations

Critics warn that a guilty person who "passes" the test might go free or that an innocent person who "fails" the test might falsely be accused of a crime.

That became a reality for Vincent Sedgwick of Henderson, Nev, who was charged with being an accessory to a rape after flunking a voice stress test in 1996. A judge eventually dismissed the charges for **lack of scientific evidence**. Sedgwick is suing the city's police department and the National Institute for Truth Verification for negligence, fraud and wrongful prosecution.

His lawyer, Ian Christopherson of Las Vegas, says he intends to put the Computer Voice Stress Analyzer--as well as those who administered it to his client--on trial, apparently for the first time.

"There may be something there that's measurable, but there's nothing there that correlates with the truth," says Christopherson.

Christopherson calls the device nothing more than a "modern-day Ouija board." And a pernicious one at that. "It's going to get some guilty people off and put some innocent people in prison."