

Boozy breath?

There's a science to checking it

By TERESA BANAS

There's more to testing a drunk than asking the person to walk a straight line or recite the alphabet backwards.

There's an unassuming little instrument called the breathalizer. This instrument is widely used in police work as a department's number one measuring stick for drunkenness.

It operates mechanically and chemically by measuring the amount of booze in one's system. A suspect merely blows into a plastic tube attached to the instrument and a reading appears.

The reading shows a percentage of alcohol to body weight and ranges from zero to point four per cent.

Cpl. John Crete, of the Redford Police Department, is a certified breathalyzer operator. He says body weight plays into the reading. A 100 pound person who has had six ounces of whiskey could register a higher reading than a 200 pound person with the same amount of booze in his system, he says.

A reading of .07 or less is not considered a drunk case. He says anyone who registers .35 per cent or more is ready for the hospital. A 4 per cent reading is "a coma case," he says.

ACCORDING TO STATE law, those

arrested for drunk driving must take the test or else their driver's license can be suspended for as long as two years.

The arresting officer does not operate the breathalizer for the person he or she has arrested. This is to avoid a charge of bias against the officer.

When the drunk is brought into the station, he or she waits 30 minutes before taking the test. This is supposed to insure that all the booze the suspect has consumed has entered the system.

Crete says, however, that it actually takes 30-60 minutes for all the alcohol to enter the blood stream.

He says the discrepancy in timing works to the benefit of the arrested drunk.

During this waiting period, the person is allowed to smoke, eat or drink anything because this could affect the reading.

Pt. John Buck says the suspect is given the benefit of the doubt in other ways. When recording the reading, the officer must round the figure off to the lowest reading. He says it could mean as much as one percentage point in the suspect's favor.

POLICE OFFICERS nonetheless say the test is "extremely accurate" and used as valid evidence in court. Its

accuracy has been corroborated by laboratory blood tests.

Crete says defense attorneys have checked the operator's procedure but never the validity of the instrument itself.

To insure an operator's accurate performance, the officer uses a check list of rules at each reading. The machine is also cleared before each reading. The instrument is checked weekly and each operator runs a simulated test monthly.

The test is given twice in each case. A variance of .02 percentage points is allowed but no more. A third test is given if the variance is greater.

A few things could throw the instrument off, such as if the drunk vomits, has something to eat or smokes a cigarette. When the person vomits, a high concentration of alcohol is registered which is not an accurate reading of the person's condition. Even smoking a cigarette could raise one's body temperature and effect the reading.

The instrument contains two chemicals that react to booze breath. The chemicals react by changing color which indicates the degree of drunkenness. This information is then mechanically transferred to a reading on the instrument's scale.

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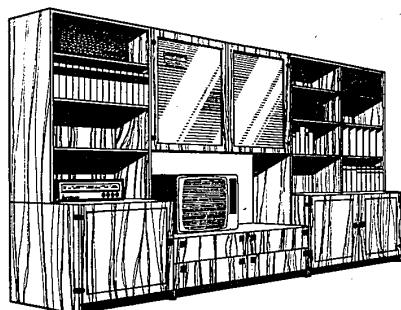


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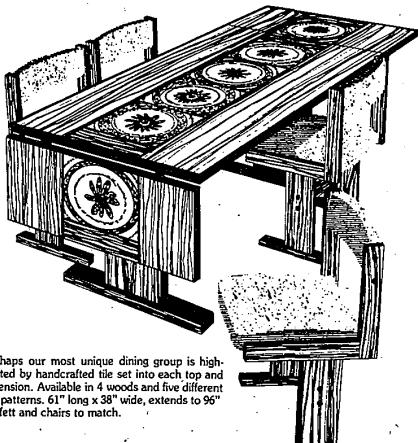
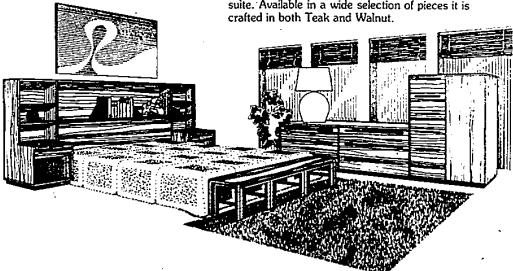
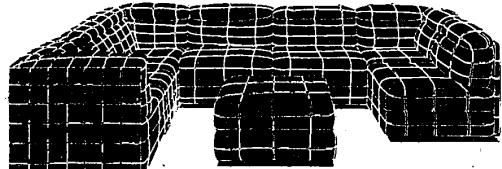
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