

Imagination and resources

The only limits for drug smugglers?

The methods and capabilities of drug smugglers are limited only by their imaginations and their resources, says Trevor Van Dam. In a recent speech to a Queensland Correctional Services Drugs Task Force seminar, he outlined how the Australian Customs Service seeks to constrain those capabilities and why it places a high value on cooperation with other law enforcement agencies in the fight against illegal drugs.

Customs works on a simple principle: cooperation is one of the keys to dealing with the drug problem in the community today.

All the links in the correctional and enforcement chains can contribute to that objective. For example, from a Customs perspective, we see prisons as an important opportunity to learn. Prisoners often have unique insights into methods of concealment, importation methodologies, and in some cases, advance information of likely importations. With Queensland Corrective Services, we are building a relationship that will enhance our overall intelligence capacities.

There are analogies between a correctional services environment and the challenges confronting Customs, particularly in drug smuggling. Here are some.

Customs deals with international air and sea passengers, a direct analogy with visitors to prisons. We deal with large amounts of international mail through mail exchanges; corrective services organisations deal with mail sent to prisons. We deal with large amounts of imported cargo and goods into Australia; corrective services personnel deal with large quantities of supplies, including food and other consumables and equipment brought into prisons. We search

premises, ships and vehicles, and can help prison officers to build search expertise.

Drugs as a form of currency

Fundamentally, traffickers in the correctional environment or the community generally see drugs as a form of currency. Drugs are used to curry favour, to enlist and to exercise power. Many addicts are used as drug couriers because they are a cheap form of 'cannon fodder'; they accept the risks because they have a vested interest in trying to secure supply cheaply.

Overall, Customs experience suggests that only two things limit the capabilities of smugglers in today's environment: their imaginations and the resources at their disposal.

While the methods of concealment have not changed much, the levels of sophistication have increased dramatically. This does not make Customs job any easier. Impregnating clothing, linings or other items in baggage is one example. The goods show no indication other than some stiffening, that drugs are present. Suspension of drugs in all forms of products from alcohol through to shampoos is becoming more common. Perhaps the most difficult of

all, combining drugs and other materials, so we find drugs moulded into soap bars or statues, or moulded into the shape of a suitcase with the suitcase built around the mould.

Our assets: skill and technology

Aside from enhancing our intelligence gathering and targeting processes, there are two principal practical detection methodologies. One is technology and the other is the skills that our people bring to bear on physical examinations.

The three areas of technology that have been most successful for Customs in recent times are drug detector dogs, backscatter x-rays, and ionscans.

We use drug detector dogs at all airports, seaports and mail exchanges and we get outstanding results. But they represent substantial commitment because of the effort that goes into breeding, selecting and training them, maintaining them and employing and maintaining their handlers.

Modern backscatter X-ray technology has been extremely useful to Customs. We have had outstanding successes in using the new backscatter X-ray technology, which works by identifying material by registering different densities.



Customs officer demonstrates drug detection equipment at the Correctional Service Drug Task Force seminar

Ionscan is leading-edge detection technology but comes with some limitations. Ionscan is incredibly sensitive. It can identify a person at third or fourth hand who has come in contact with drugs or a drug carrier. But that extraordinary degree of sensitivity creates some difficulties. For example, in the United States, ionscan cannot be used to trace traffickers through currency because a substantial percentage of US currency in circulation has been tainted by narcotics contact.

'Methods of concealment are endless. Methods of detection are more limited.'

The importance of people

All the best technology in the world is only as good as the people who use it. We have found that it is highly beneficial to ensure that our people are thoroughly trained on the technology they will use, use it regularly and build up practical expertise.

But the greatest value we get from our officers working at the border is the way in which they apply their skills and intelligence. In our training, we develop and hone skills, but the first and most fundamental thing we try to engender among customs officers is a healthy scepticism. The key to effective detection is saying, "How would I do it?"

As well, we want them to ask themselves, "If I was doing it, what might cause a criminal act to show itself to a Customs officer". A lot of front-line staff training is in behavioural analysis and body language techniques

which have proved extremely successful. We also have a rigorous regime for personal and goods searching, so that we are confident that whoever is undertaking search activity is doing it to a standard protocol and to a predictable level of quality.

If the methods of concealment are endless, the methods of detection certainly are more limited. We continually search for the best and most effective technology and the most effective application of skills by our people. In the end, they are the keys to successful interception of traffickers.

Trevor Van Dam is Customs Regional Director, Queensland. This article is edited from a talk he gave to the Drug Task Force of the Queensland Corrections, at the Sir David Longland Correctional Centre, Brisbane, in November 1998. Customs in Queensland helped Queensland Corrections to establish its drug detector dog unit and is training its officers in behavioural analysis.