

Technology adds to drug-war arsenal

Customs now has available to it equipment with an 'incredible' capacity to pick up even the most minute traces of illicit drugs—plus some highly trained and specialised ship and aircraft search crews to use it.

The technology includes:

- large X-ray machines for scanning cargo;
- backscatter X-ray equipment to detect materials in suitcases or cargo that would not be picked up by conventional X-ray equipment;
- ionscan particle analysing equipment that can detect minute particles of a wide range of illicit substances; and
- a hand-held device called a 'Buster Contraband Detector' that measures the dimensions of a container and tells, by measuring any change in density, whether it contains a false cavity.

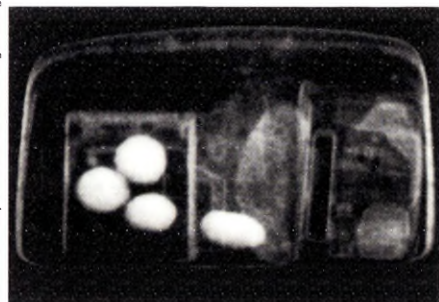
Search facilities have been established in capital cities to fulfil an important element of Customs activity by investing heavily in technology. Such innovations allow quicker, more effective and less intrusive examination of cargo and also allow specialist ship and aircraft search crews to quickly determine whether a more detailed inspection is needed.

Opening Customs new *Ships' Search Centre of Expertise* in Adelaide recently, where specialist staff are trained for its operational centres, the Minister for Justice and Customs, Senator Amanda Vanstone, said that the new centre reflected Australia's commitment to

Standard X-ray image of a suitcase with only one ball of simulated illegal substance visible.



Backscatter X-ray image reveals four balls of a simulated illegal import are inside the suitcase.



Saris Kahn monitors goods going through a Customs X-ray machine in Sydney.



Pictures courtesy American Science & Engineering Inc.

keeping illicit drugs out of the country.

"This search training facility represents a key component in the vital task of protecting the community at the border," she said. "It can be used to train up to 20 cargo search officers at a time.

"Today's criminals use hi-tech methods to conceal prohibited goods from authorities. This equipment will help Customs to stay ahead."

The training facility is similar to those operating in Canada and Britain. The centre conducts courses on contemporary ship search techniques, procedures and operations; conducts reviews and certification of trained officers; liaises with health and safety regulators and assists in identifying appropriate equipment and emerging technology.

Quite a number of regional officers have already completed the

training course. All are to remain available for ship search duties for at least two years and can be deployed to other regions to supplement local staff.

Frank Malkoun, who has had extensive border experience, is the inaugural Manager of the Centre of Excellence. Frank, and some selected officers from the four regions, attended ship search training courses in Canada and Britain before our centre opened.

Marble table-top scam smashed

*By Les Jones,
National Director, Border Division, Australian Customs Service*

Customs latest weapon in the fight against illicit drugs is a machine so sensitive that it can show existence of drugs where other indicators suggest otherwise. Here is an example.

Customs officers recently identified some marble-topped tables from South East Asia that they had strong reason to suspect were being used to import heroin. Customs new "ionscan" machine confirmed their suspicions but an X-ray of the table tops contradicted the ionscan results.

An X-ray showed nothing because the marble was too dense. So the officers drilled a hole through the marble and pulled the drill bit out, but there was nothing there. That was two technologies giving one finding and another, newer technology, giving a contrary result.

In the finish, the officers made a decision to destroy the marble top table. So they smashed it and there were the layers of heroin—23 kilograms all told—hidden inside the

reconstituted marble tops of the tables. The smugglers had encased the heroin with special plastic so that when our officers pulled the drill bit out, it came out clean.

While that is a very good example of where the ionscan is providing some excellent advice and guidance, I don't think anything is ever going to replace the need for Customs officers to make their own judgements—which they did in this case despite the X-ray and the drill bit providing negative results.

The ionscan is another useful tool that officers can use to support their judgements.

