

Beat: News

Roadside drug testing

Irish police given the power to test

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USPA NEWS - The Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Mr Shane Ross on Wednesday 12th April, announced the commencement of the drug driving provisions in the Road Traffic Act 2016. One of the key measures in the legislation provides for Preliminary Drug Testing, which will enable Gardaí to test

motorists whom they suspect of driving under the influence of drugs at the roadside. The launch of the new measures, in conjunction with An Garda Síochána, the Medical Bureau for Road Safety (MBRS) and the Road Safety Authority (RSA) took place at Store Street Garda Station in Dublin.

The new Garda powers mean Gardaí can now establish roadside checkpoints, Mandatory Impairment Checkpoints (MIT), to test drivers for the presence of both alcohol

and drugs. The new drug testing devices (Dräger DrugTest 5000) involve testing a sample of a driver's oral fluid (saliva) for the presence of cannabis, cocaine, opiates (e.g. heroin, morphine) and benzodiazepines (e.g. valium). The new devices will also be available in Garda stations.

The MBRS has found that of the 3,020 specimens of blood and urine that it received in 2016, 24% confirmed positive for drugs other than alcohol. Of these, 91% were specimens from male drivers, most of whom were in the 17-44 year age range. Cannabis was the most prevalent drug detected, followed by benzodiazepines.

Speaking at the launch, Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Mr Shane Ross, said the introduction of Preliminary Drug Testing is an

important step in tackling drug driving: "Driving under the influence of drugs has been an offence in Ireland since 1961. The law states that a person must not be impaired (through alcohol, drugs or any combination of both) while driving or in charge of a vehicle. However, driving under the influence of drugs remains a problem in Ireland. It is estimated that drug driving is a factor in approximately one in ten fatal crashes. Drug driving not only puts the driver at risk but also passengers and others who share the road. The introduction of Preliminary Drug Testing now strengthens the ability of the Gardaí to tackle the problem. This is just one step in a multi-faceted approach my Department and I are taking to tackle the recent increase in

road fatalities." [?] Assistant Commissioner Michael Finn, Roads Policing and Major Event /Emergency Management, stated that: "The new roadside test for drugs will enable An Garda Síochána to tackle the serious issue of drug driving. There will be 86 drug screening devices located in Garda stations nationally and 50 more available for use at the roadside. Over time up to 150 devices will be available for use at the roadside. While the test will take longer to conduct than the roadside test for alcohol, the test is easy to carry out and within minutes will tell if a driver has drugs in their system. This new screening device is an important tool for

An Garda Síochána in the identification of drug drivers, ensuring our roads are safer for everyone to use." [?]

Director of the Medical Bureau for Road Safety, Professor Denis Cusack explained that there is a twin-track approach to tackling drug driving in Ireland: "Firstly, it is against the law to drive under the influence of drugs, including prescribed drugs, where your driving is impaired to such an extent that you don't have proper control of the vehicle. Secondly, it is against the law to drive under the influence of certain drugs, regardless of driving performance, above specified levels. There are currently three drugs tested for in this category "" cannabis, cocaine and heroin. If you are found to have any of these drugs above the

the specified limits, you can be prosecuted for drug driving even if your driving is not impaired." [?]

Professor Denis Cusack, was also anxious to allay the fears of anybody taking prescription or over-the-counter medicines: "Drivers with medical conditions should continue to take their prescribed medications in accordance with healthcare advice and medical fitness-

to-drive guidelines. If you are taking prescription or over-the-counter medicines under the advice of your doctor or pharmacist, and so long as those medicines don't impair your driving, you have nothing to be concerned about. If you are in any doubt, speak to your doctor or pharmacist about your concerns."

Chief Executive of the Road Safety Authority, Moyagh Murdock, said that

persons driving under the influence of drugs are a danger to themselves and others: "Our own research shows that many drug drivers incorrectly believe that certain drugs make them better drivers and imagine themselves at low risk of collision. They also tend to overestimate their driving ability and show little understanding of how drugs affect their driving. Many have poor awareness of the impairing effects of drugs and make bad decisions about driving as a result. I have no doubt that the introduction of Preliminary Drug Testing will have a profound and positive impact on road safety as drivers will certainly think twice before driving under the influence of drugs."

Preliminary Drug Testing will be carried out by An Garda Síochána using

using the Dräger DrugTest® 5000, an easy to use mobile drug screening system that uses oral fluid to test for some of the most commonly abused drugs.

To support the introduction of Preliminary Drug Testing, the RSA will run a comprehensive online media campaign, targeting the use of illicit drugs in the 18 to 34 year old age bracket, to raise awareness of the new Garda drug-testing powers. This campaign will primarily feature videos which demonstrate how the drug tests will be administered on the road side and the consequences should a driver be detected driving under the influence of drugs. This awareness campaign will run on social media, radio and digital platforms.

The RSA is also running a parallel campaign aimed at allaying the

the concerns of those taking medicines and driving (over the counter and prescription drugs). Specifically, the RSA is putting information leaflets into pharmacies and doctors' surgeries nationwide.

For more information on the introduction of Preliminary Drug Testing, see the Frequently Asked Questions document.

For further information contact:

RSA Communications Office, Ballina: 096 25008

Or

Medical Bureau of Road Safety: 01 7165511 / Email: forensic.medicine@ucd.ie

or

Garda Press Office: 01 666 2071 or email pressooffice@garda.ie