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Features

Piecing together a history of drug use from a few strands of hair

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by Chris Kelsey, Western Mail

A Cardiff-based business is at the forefront of commercial drug testing from hair samples, Chris Kelsey writes

Business in Wales readers are not the sort of people to have debilitating drink or drug habits. But if you were be warned: your drug taking history could be betrayed by your hair.

Evidence of drug use can stay in the hair indefinitely, so a picture of someone's use over a period can be built up by testing.

And the process for carrying out this testing on a commercial basis has been developed by a Cardiff-based company, Tricho Tech – now a wholly-owned subsidiary of Concateno, itself owned by Nasdaq-listed Medical Innovations since August last year.

Nick Ralph, operational manager of Tricho Tech, explained that the Cardiff business is accredited to carry out drug and alcohol tests on blood, saliva and urine as well as hair.

But since its acquisition by Concateno in 2007 Tricho Tech specialises in testing hair samples.



"We could do the other metrics but Concateno has two other labs in the UK which specialise in urine and saliva testing, so the Cardiff business specialises in hair and acts as a backup lab for the others," he said.

The main customers for Tricho Tech's services are solicitors and social services dealing with child custody and child protection cases.

"They come to us if they want to ascertain if the parent or guardian has been taking drugs or alcohol," Mr Ralph said.

"They want us to test for three or six months and see whether use is declining or has stopped. That's one of the unique features we can do compared to urine or saliva testing."

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The company also does pre-employment testing for the police force or safety critical industries such as travel where they use drug testing as part of the recruitment process.

Tricho Tech began life as a spin out from Cardiff Bio-analytical Services and has close links with the University of Glamorgan.

It has two permanent research and development staff whose job is to make sure the company is on top of the latest developments in the drug world.

"We can test for more than 50 analytes over 15 drug groups," Mr Ralph said.

"What commonly happens is that when a new drug comes on the street and becomes the fashion, people want to know if the donor is taking it, so we have to develop a way to detect it. In recent years we have developed tests for GHB, alcohol, steroids and mephedrone."

Tricho Tech deals with 20,000 samples a year, all at the Cardiff site. It has 70 staff working there at the moment and plans to create another 18 jobs over the next three years.

Turnover last year was £8m, having doubled since 2007.

The company is the current holder of the Wales Innovation Award presented by the Wales Quality Centre, which it won for the development of steroid testing in hair.

"Because we've got research staff in-house and links with the university we do help progress knowledge in our field," said Mr Ralph.

"We always want to keep up with the drugs that are coming into circulation, but we also work on our processes to improve customer service and reduce turnaround time."

Much of what Tricho Tech does cannot be patented because parts of the process may already have been demonstrated in a university somewhere, although the company is often the first to commercialise it for the market.

"There's certain elements of our process which we wouldn't want to get out into the public domain anyway," said Mr Ralph.

Tricho Tech has seen growth flatten off a little from its impressive figures of the last few years, but it's still a healthy 5% ahead of last year for the first five months of this.

It's business is not immune to the impact of the recession and the spending squeeze.

"We've seen a cut back on discretionary testing and we're also seeing people being a bit more careful in the drugs they ask us to test for.

"Previously they would have asked us to test for more drugs and now they're telling us to be more specific – which is a bit risky because if the donor says I've only been taking cocaine and so you don't test for cannabis, heroin and amphetamine, then you won't find them.

"We're also seeing more competition from businesses who say they offer the same service as us but actually send their samples to laboratories overseas to be tested."

Although most of Tricho Tech's business is in England and Wales it does some business in Europe, Asia and Australia.

The company offers an end to end process, from sample collection and secure chain of custody, to analysis and an expert report which can be presented in court.

It also has expert witnesses who can go to court to give evidence.

So if you did ever fall foul of a drug test, Tricho Tech's expertise could be against you. Be warned.