

Merry Christmas from the Banner staff



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The Blue Banner

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Staff photo--Sarah Gottfried

A white Christmas?

Asheville has been brightened by white lights this year for the Christmas season. These trees, located in front of Memorial Mission Hospital, are part of the display that runs down Biltmore Avenue.

Graduates can expect more drug testing

By Kelly Smith
Staff Writer

Nearly 30 percent of employers of college graduates now screen job applicants for drug use and another 20 percent plan to adopt the practice within the next two years, according to a new study by the College Placement Council (CPC).

"At this point there is a 50 percent chance that you will be screened for drugs when applying for a job," said David Johnston, career planning and placement director at UNCA.

Employee testing isn't anything new. In the 1950s, companies got information on their employees through psychological profiles, employment histories, criminal records and personal information.

The recent increase in the drug testing of employees and applicants has produced hot debate over whether the tests are constitutional, but despite the growing number of lawsuits, courts have so far upheld the legality of drug testing.

At present only government workers have constitutional protection against unreasonable search and seizure by their employers.

Many companies located in western North Carolina such as Westinghouse Electric Corp., Duke Power Co. and Carolina Power and Light Co. use the relatively inexpensive EMIT (Enzyme Multiplied Immunoassay Technique) for drug testing.

This test is often unreliable. It is often less accurate than the breath

test that law enforcement agencies use to detect alcohol, according to Arthur McBay, chief toxicologist with the N.C. Medical Examiner's Office.

Another drawback to the test is that it doesn't measure the level of impairment at the time of testing. It

only detects drugs in the system, not when they were taken. The test can detect cocaine up to three days after consumption, and marijuana as long as three weeks later, said McBay.

Furthermore, he added, over-the-counter drugs such as "Advil" are detectable with the test and then confused with other drugs.

Employers do have good reason for making the tests mandatory, according to the CPC's report.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce estimates that drug and alcohol abuse among workers costs employers \$60 billion a year through lost productivity, absenteeism, accidents and theft of company property.

Of the 497 organizations that were included in the CPC report, 140 reported that they required drug screening for job applicants. Nearly all these employers screen employees and applicants for both marijuana (97.9 percent) and hard drugs (98.6 percent).

Safety ranks first as a reason for the screening. Security, product quality and service are also major concerns.

Employers do not usually disqualify an applicant if he fails the initial test. "Many employers will have another, more sophisticated test done," said Johnston.