A Survey of Operational Police Involved in the Delivery of Random Breath Testing (RBT) in Queensland, Australia

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OBJECTIVE: Over the last two decades, there has been a major reduction in the involvement of alcohol in road crashes in Australia. The evidence suggests that a key factor in this reduction has been the introduction and ongoing operation of Random Breath Testing (RBT). This paper reports on the findings of a survey of operational police involved in the delivery of RBT, which was undertaken as part of a comprehensive review of the program in the Australian state of Queensland. The primary aim was to identify those factors that acted as either facilitators or barriers to the effective delivery of RBT at an operational level.

METHOD: With the assistance of the Queensland Police Service (QPS), a questionnaire was distributed to a random sample of 950 operational police likely to be involved in the delivery of RBT, stratified by the QPS’s geographic regions. A total of 421 questionnaires were returned representing a 44% response rate. The 39 item questionnaire was structured around the concepts in Semler’s (1999) Organisational Alignment Model, in order to explore key organisational factors influencing the performance of RBT.

RESULTS: The survey findings highlighted a range of factors that facilitate the delivery of RBT. Firstly, the majority of the participants (80%) agreed with the overall goals of RBT and acknowledged its deterrence, as well as, apprehension functions. Secondly, there was strong agreement among the participants that they were adequately trained to conduct RBT (95%) and were aware of the policies and procedures relating to the program (94%). However, a number of potential barriers to the effective operation of RBT also emerged. Firstly, the responses indicated that there were some concerns about the overall amount of testing being conducted and the rationale underpinning the determination of testing levels. Secondly, while many participants (58%) agreed that they would volunteer for RBT duties when the need arose, only 27% agreed that they preferred to conduct RBT rather than other traffic duties. While this probably reflects the nature of the task, it may also reflect a lack of formal rewards for conducting RBT. For example, only 21% of the participants agreed that their involvement in RBT was taken into account in formal performance appraisals. Thirdly, a number of cultural factors appeared to promote the apprehension functions of RBT over and above its deterrence goals. For example, the participants were more likely to agree that they would be praised by their colleagues for catching drink drivers rather than conducting a large number of tests. Similarly, only 22% agreed that they were provided with feedback about the success of RBT. This may have contributed to the fact that 47% of the participants were unsure as to whether RBT had proven effective in reducing the road toll.

CONCLUSIONS: The results confirm that there is strong support for RBT among operational police in Queensland. While the participants indicated that they were adequately trained and supported to perform the task, a number of potential areas for improvement were identified. Central among these is the need to develop more formal rewards for conducting RBT and to provide more information to operational police about the success of the program.

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Keywords: Random breath testing, Deterrence, Detection