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Halton Regional Police polygraph unit

The truth about lie detector tests — they're tough to beat so you might as well 'fess up

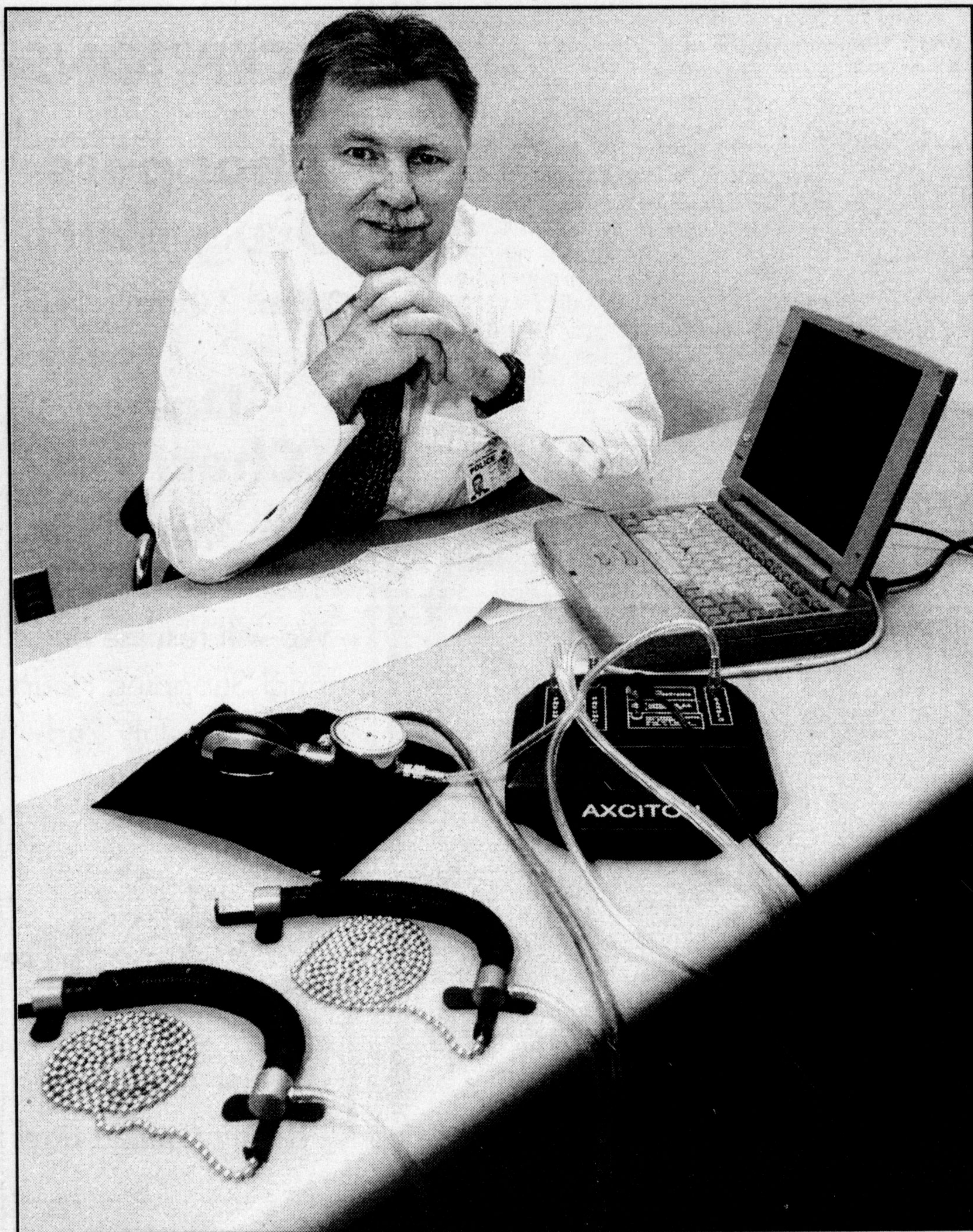


Photo by GRAHAM PAINE

Sgt. Scott McLaughlin of Halton Regional Police's polygraph unit says lie detector tests are reliable and can be valuable to investigations.

By **KAREN SMITH**
The Champion

They may not be admissible in court, but the results of lie detector tests can be a valuable investigative tool, says a Halton Regional Police sergeant.

Now computerized, it's a device that some skeptics deem unreliable, but one that police forces across the country look to confidently, said Sgt. Scott McLaughlin of the force's polygraph unit.

"When I'm done I'm 100 per cent sure the answer is correct," he said.

Conducted properly, polygraph tests are actually about 96 per cent accurate, according to reports, but the information obtained from them can't be used as evidence in a prosecution.

The results, however, can point investigators in the right direction as a last resort — when all other investigative means have been exhausted, Sgt. McLaughlin said.

In fact, the sergeant is called upon three to four times a week to conduct polygraph tests for Halton and Hamilton-Wentworth investigators. He questions suspects for all types of crimes including theft, child abuse and murder. His skills are shared by both forces as a cost-saving measure.

Having a competent examiner at the helm is the first step in accurately distinguishing truthful people from liars, the sergeant said.

A former Milton fraud investigator who left the force's north Halton criminal investigation bureau to become a polygraphist, Sgt. McLaughlin underwent a year's training that included three months at the Canadian Police College in Ottawa. The examiner's job is technical and tedious.

"There isn't a police polygraphist in Canada that isn't well trained," he said, noting the demanding workload students must endure.

Polygraph subjects, who in Ontario can only be tested if they agree, sit in a long-armed, black piece of furniture that Sgt. McLaughlin said reminds most people of an electric chair.

Devices that monitor sweat glands, heart rate and breathing are attached to the subject's fingers, arm, chest and abdomen.

The chair is equipped with a motion detector to pick up any movement by the subject. Movement can throw off the readings.

A person fibbing to police experiences a similar reaction to the adrenaline rush that occurs when danger is near, Sgt. McLaughlin said.

"When a person tells a lie, the same thing happens," he said.

The changes in the body are recorded on the computer — like lines on a heart monitor —

and the examiner scrutinizes the results carefully.

While a seasoned liar can look you straight in the face and be deceptive, the body can't be untruthful, he said.

Less than five per cent of tests are inconclusive.

The test itself takes about 20 minutes, but the entire process can last as long as three hours.

The examiner and subject go over how the test works and together determine how questions will be worded to prevent any misinterpretation in their meaning that could result in inaccurate results.

All in all, about 70 per cent of subjects are truthful, Sgt. McLaughlin said. The other 30 per cent generally think they can beat the test.

Many suspects have refused to take polygraph tests, but not necessarily because they're guilty.

Sgt. McLaughlin said contrary to his opinion, some people simply don't believe in them.

"If I didn't believe it works, I wouldn't be doing it," he said.

"When I'm done I'm 100 per cent sure the answer is correct."
SGT. SCOTT MCLAUGHLIN

Cableworks 14 Programming Schedule — June 29th - July 5th, 1999

Tuesday, June 29th	Wednesday, June 30th	Thursday, July 1st	Monday, July 5th
5:30, 6:30, 7:30pm Plugged In!	5:30, 6:30, 7:30pm Plugged In!	CANADA DAY	5:30, 6:30, 7:30pm Plugged In!
6:00pm Seniors Showcase	6:00pm Cable in the Classroom	No Programming	6:00pm SportsZONE Game of the Week
7:00pm Money Week	7:00pm Swap Talk - Live		7:00pm The Gardening Show
8:00pm Halton Region Council - June 23rd	8:00pm Jr. B Lacrosse All Star Game - June 26th		

Feature of the week: The Jr. B Lacrosse All Star Game from Georgetown - Wednesday, 8 pm

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