

Shortening the odds in the fight against illegal drugs

A new Customs search facility in Sydney is using sophisticated techniques and technology to advance the fight against illicit drugs.

Opened by the Minister for Justice and Customs, Senator Amanda Vanstone, in January 1999, the facility cost more than \$1 million. It contains state-of-the-art fixed and mobile X-ray equipment, ionscan particle analysers and other sophisticated scanning technology as well as drug testing and evidence examination areas. It also houses the monitoring centre for closed circuit camera surveillance of Sydney's wharves.

More than 40 specialist officers are based at the facility. As well as searching cargo, they can be deployed quickly anywhere in New South Wales for on-the-spot searches.

Senator Vanstone said the facility demonstrated the Commonwealth Government's continued commitment to resourcing Customs as part of an integrated national law enforcement effort to combat illicit drugs.

"Under the Government's Tough on Drugs strategy we have provided Customs with about \$34 million additional money over a period of four years to focus on

supply reduction measures," Senator Vanstone said. The new facility was only one element in the fight against illicit drugs.

She said the facility would allow Customs officers to initially increase container searches in Sydney from 40 to 200 a month. When fully operational capacity would rise to 300 a month. All cargo was subject to risk assessment. Cargo that was assessed as high risk was examined.

"Customs authorities around the world by and large use risk assessment. It is just not feasible or efficient to look at a large number of containers where there is no risk", she said. "Just as policing has moved on from the days of Inspector Plod walking around looking for something to go wrong in front of his eyes, so Customs work has moved on. It now has very sophisticated means of putting together risk assessments. Some of the more significant hauls that I have become aware of have come about because of risk profiles – not by something being opened by accident.

"Customs has been very successful in utilising risk assessment methods in the past 12 months, having made eight very significant detections of drugs concealed in containerised cargo. The methods of concealment have ranged from heroin in tins of pineapple or water chestnuts to cannabis concealed in furniture.

"This new facility will make it possible for Customs to examine more cargo and at the same time utilise state of the art technology such as x-rays and ionscan or drug particle analysis to identify the presence of illicit drugs concealed in cargo. With this new facility, Customs has got not only the space but the technology to keep up with people who run drugs and who try to bring these goods into the country".

The ionscanners can detect minute residual particles of substances such as drugs. The backscatter X-ray machines produce enhanced images, like three-dimensional representations allowing Customs officers to detect prohibited items, even when closely packed with other materials. They can also indicate the presence of false sides or compartments in containers and suitcases.

