

# The Penile Plethysmograph (PPG)

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(An excerpt from *Without Precedent*; a book soon to be published by Reclamation Ministry to assist individuals required to register and their families.)

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As an adult offender in treatment, you may be given a test to determine your sexual interests – either the plethysmograph or Abel Screen. The IAT test is being experimented with in Canada at the time of this writing. Here are some things you should know about the plethysmograph.



Few know what it is. Most don't know how to spell it or even say it. I've seen it spelled any one of a number of ways. But the correct spelling is; p – l – e – t – h – y – s – m – o – g – r – a – p – h (pronounced pluh – THIZ – muh – graf.) Abbreviated PPG, it is used to measure arousal in an adult male by strapping a wire around his penis and

subjecting him to sexually explicit material. A Czechoslovakian researcher named Kurt Freund (1917 – 1996) is generally credited for developing it in the 1950's for military use in identifying homosexuals.

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## **“A Prisoner Should Not Be Compelled to Stimulate Himself Sexually in Order for the Government to Get a Sense of His Current Proclivities.” – Judge John Noonan**

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But the device is shrouded in controversy, and its use in a sex offender treatment setting is really questionable. Even Freund published articles describing its shortcomings. U.S. courts have ruled PPG test results inadmissible; they don't meet Daubert Standards.<sup>1</sup> In 2006, the U.S. 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court of Appeals (*U.S. v. Weber*, 451 F.3d 552) ruled the device unreasonable and intrusive. "A prisoner should not be compelled to stimulate himself sexually in order for the government to get a sense of his current proclivities." – Judge John Noonan. To me, the final blow, so to

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<sup>1</sup> The **Daubert standard** is a rule of evidence regarding the admissibility of expert witnesses' testimony and excluding the presentation of unqualified evidence to a jury. It prevents so-called expert testimony from being heard in court if the testimony is based on unreliable or unproven devices like the polygraph or in this case the plethysmograph.

speaking, about its value and reliability comes directly from the DSM-IV, the “bible” for mental health professionals: *“Penile plethysmography has been used in research settings to assess various paraphilias by measuring an individual’s sexual arousal in response to visual and auditory stimuli. The reliability and validity of this procedure in clinical assessment have not been well established, and clinical experience suggests that subjects can simulate response by manipulating mental images.”* (DSM-IV-TR, Paraphilias, at 567) That statement pretty much slams the door on the PPG being a reliable, predictive, measuring device!



Despite all the controversy, the device continues to be widely used (or misused) in sex offender treatment. Unfortunately, U.S. courts have allowed use of the device as a means to monitor sex offenders on parole, probation, or civilly committed. The test is administered by having a person (a male) sit in a private area and placing a wire linked to a stretchable band of mercury around the shaft of his penis. The wire is connected to a device that measures penis circumference while the person is subjected to various sexually explicit scenarios. The sexual material includes both audios and visuals depicting adult rape, voyeurism, frottage, sex with children, and consensual adult sex. Child sexual scenarios are divided into those involving physical force and those involving emotional manipulation, i.e. misuse of authority and trust. Any measured arousal to scenarios other than consensual adult sex is considered deviant. Because the person being tested is in a private area and not being observed directly, randomly selected pictures have symbols or cues on them. When a cue or symbol appears, the person must respond by flipping a switch or by some other signal, thereby indicating he is actually looking at the pictures. This is one way to ensure someone is not trying to manipulate test results.

The PPG is generally administered to individuals when they first enter treatment, in order to form a so-called baseline, and then periodically throughout their treatment as a means of measuring progress. Less deviant and higher healthy arousal would be considered progress, but, as stated earlier, there are some major issues surrounding the PPG's application and use that makes even this application questionable. The most significant ones are:

1. **A lack of standardization:** there is a lack of standardized materials used as stimuli for subjects in the test. Therapists vary greatly in the materials used ranging from mild material (nude adults and children in bathing suits) to hardcore pornography (adult and child). This has a direct effect on the interpretation of the test results.

2. **Susceptibility to manipulation:** one of the biggest issues is the device's susceptibility to manipulation, making results unreliable. Some subjects can control arousal to sexual stimuli and therefore influence the results. Some have reported that arousal was easily stifled in a laboratory setting, rendering the results inaccurate.
3. **The inference that arousal is linked to deviancy:** The Skeptic's Dictionary puts it this way: a film of a woman eating a banana in a particularly provocative way may arouse a man. Still, he may have no desire to engage in or have sex with a bowl of fruit. A heterosexual man or woman may be aroused by the sight of lesbians engaging in oral sex but have no desire to have sex with lesbians or in the presence of lesbians. Strong arousal need not imply strong desire for what causes the arousal, and weak arousal need not imply weak desire. Furthermore, no test can determine whether a person will act on his feelings and desires. Using results to conclude the subject will act out is highly questionable!

In the early 1990's, there were nude pictures of adults and children. None of the pictures showed any of the subjects in provocative or sexual poses, and I was told that the pictures of children were taken at a nudist colony, as if that made it more acceptable. Since then, due to public outrage, pictures of nude children have been replaced with pictures of children in swimsuits. However, I don't know if everyone administering the test has done that across the board.



Less intrusive tests than the PPG are available. Visual Reaction Time (VRT) tests measure arousal without requiring a subject to strap a wire around his penis. As of this writing, the most widely used tests are the Abel Screen and Affinity Assessment. But are they any more accurate and reliable than the PPG? There is also a new method being developed and tested at Harvard University called the Implicit Association Test (IAT). It was originally developed to uncover people's hidden political biases but is being tested in Canada for possible use in determining an individual's sexual attraction to children.

What makes me sad is to know that there are still treatment providers out there using the PPG despite all the controversy over its use. In my opinion, it is highly unethical. Knowing there are serious flaws in the administration, application, and use of this test but still administering it is wrong!