

HAIR OF THE GROG

By **CLARE HUTCHINSON**

HAIR tests that can reveal a parent's boozing habits are becoming the latest weapon to be used by divorce courts across the nation.

A six-inch strand of hair can tell scientists exactly how much a mum or dad has been drinking over a 12-month period.

And Wales tops the table when it comes to parents testing positive for alcohol abuse, according to latest figures.

Researchers at science-lab Trimega developed the technique two years ago and, since then, more than 5,000 people have been tested in the UK.

They found that as hair forms, it absorbs tiny traces of alcohol known as metabolites. These are locked into the hair as it grows, leaving tell-tale signs of how much a person drinks. Similar technology was previously used for drug testing.

The test is now being used by social services in family courts and in divorce cases when parents claim their estranged partner has been hitting the bottle.

Family lawyer Kerry Mordey, a partner at Hopkins Law in Cardiff, said the test has become common among warring parents in Wales.

"We have used them quite a lot in the past year," she said. "If somebody has alleged in

Courts use strand test on boozers

law proceedings their ex-partner is abusing alcohol, these tests can prove it either way.

"In one case, a wife demanded a hair test because she was convinced her husband was consuming alcohol but it didn't show up, so she was forced to give him access to his children.

"What we are advised to do is have three different tests in conjunction with each other. These include two blood tests and the hair alcohol test.

"The blood tests show short-term use but the hair test can give a much fuller picture, for example, how much has been consumed over a longer period of time."

Trimega's managing director Avi Lasarow said: "Hair is the gold standard for testing; it can give you a real pattern of abuse over a longer time period.

"Until we had this on the market there was no way of determining whether individuals had a long-term alcohol dependency."

The company says the tests can tell how

much a person has drunk up to a year in the past and can distinguish between social drinkers and those classed as "alcohol dependent" – drinkers who average 7.5 units or more a day.

A study by the company found that 44% of Welsh parents tested were alcohol-dependent, the highest reading in the UK and well above the 35% average. Across the nation, 48% of fathers tested positive compared to 40% of mothers.

A tuft of hair about the diameter of a pencil is needed for the tests, which usually take about a week to process. If no head hair is available, body hair can be used instead.

A South Wales mum-of-four, who wished to remain anonymous, said the pioneering test could have helped her stop her ex-husband from gaining custody of her youngest son.

The 45-year-old, who is herself a recovering alcoholic, had her children taken away by social services after they were put on the at-risk register. But the youngest was given back to his father after he passed a blood alcohol test.

"I know he and his partner both drink," she said.

"But the blood test didn't show it. Now I'm fighting to be able to see my son but, as a recovering alcoholic, I can't get access. Even though I've been clean now for a year. I would love to have the chance to use that [hair] test."