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Position Statement

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SSDP Australia's statement in support of Pill Testing

SSDP Australia supports pill testing as a response to the risks of drug use in the party scene.

Australians are among the heaviest users of 'ecstasy' in the world. Unfortunately, the ecstasy we use is also some of the most dangerous. Widely varying in purity, and frequently laced with harmful adulterants, the pills that partygoers take are rarely as advertised. Even when pills are pure MDMA, the increase in strength can result in a dangerously high dose. As a consequence, ecstasy users are often exposed to a high level of risk. This risk can prove fatal, as we have already seen this summer. At festivals this year and in previous ones, multiple deaths have been caused by MDMA overdoses and the presence of toxic adulterants such as PMA or NBOME.

Not knowing what's in our drugs is killing Australians. But there is another way, and it could save lives: pill testing.

Pill-Testing: Reducing the risks

Pill testing is a key harm reduction initiative, with widespread support from medical and policy experts. Harm reduction, one of the three pillars in Australia's National Drug Strategy of Harm Minimisation, neither endorses nor judges drug use, but seeks to limit the risk and harm inherent in drug taking. Pill testing fits perfectly within this model, as a proven measure that reduces harm by simply providing users with more information on the substances they are taking. In many instances, just providing this information encourages party-goers to reconsider their use of a potentially harmful substance. Last July at the UK's Secret Garden Party festival 25% of tested substances were discarded by users, many of whom were informed that their pill's contents were not as expected.

Within forward-thinking nations that have invested more heavily in harm reduction measures, comprehensive pill testing services are legal and readily available. In cities such as Vienna, Madrid, and Zurich, citizens are able to anonymously drop off their pills at testing centres and then retrieve the results online hours later. Using Gas-Chromatography Mass Spectrometry (GCMS) or other analytical technologies, the samples they provide are analysed to provide precise results on their contents and purity. With many of these labs running for over a decade, all the evidence shows that pill testing

promotes safer drug taking practices to those already using drugs, but doesn't result in increased individual usage or an increase in the number of people who use drugs.

We have heard numerous medical experts and harm reduction advocates push for pill testing to be introduced in Australia. Emergency medicine specialist Dr David Caldicott, President of Drug Law Reform Australia Dr Alex Wodak, Dr Monica Barratt of the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, and many others have argued that it is of vital necessity for state governments to provide pill testing services, particularly at music festivals. Doing so will reduce the death toll and drug-related harm, and provide an opportunity to educate people about safer usage practices.

Segments of the political establishment and law enforcement have also recognised the benefits of testing. The Greens and the Australian Sex Party have called for the introduction of more comprehensive drug testing services, while Ex-NSW Premier Bob Carr and former Australian Federal Police Commissioner Mick Palmer have also expressed their support for introducing pill-testing services. Unfortunately, Australia's current political leaders have not. New South Wales' and Victoria's Premiers have both explicitly said they will not allow pill-testing services, claiming that to do so would be to tacitly endorse drug taking, and that they will continue to focus on trying to reduce drug usage through anti-drug messaging and zero tolerance policing, including controversial deterrent measures such as sniffer dogs and strip searches.

In New South Wales, where sniffer dogs are most prominently used, around 75% of all searches do not result in establishing possession of drugs. Furthermore, sniffer dogs are not only ineffective but potentially dangerous; a 2006 NSW Ombudsman report found little evidence of efficacy and reported that some people responded to the sight of sniffer dogs by consuming all of their drugs. In at least one of the recent festival deaths a heavy and oppressive police presence was implicated in dissuading patrons from seeking medical care, with tragic results.

Throughout Australia this summer, at hundreds of music festivals and other events, partygoers will continue to use drugs, particularly ecstasy. Without proper testing services, many people will be exposed to unnecessary extra risk. There have already been at least 3 drug-related deaths at events this festival season. An urgent response is required and until true political leadership emerges, harm reduction advocates are being left to fill a policy vacuum.

Reagent Test Kits: An Interim Step

In response to this vacuum, Students for Sensible Drug Policy (SSDP) Australia have put our support behind the key initiative of providing free reagent pill testing kits.

This initiative will be delivered through two avenues. The first is via SSDP's University of Melbourne chapter, which has worked with the University's student union to successfully pass a motion to provide students with a free pack that includes the test kit and important safety information. With the support of Harm Reduction Australia, Family Drug Support Australia, the Alcohol and Drug Foundation and SSDP Australia, the Union's program has been endorsed to provide crucial harm reduction information to students.

The second initiative, the Just One Life campaign, is a collaboration between SSDP, Harm Reduction Australia, the Ted Noffs Foundation, Harm Reduction Victoria's Dancewize, and the Australian Drug Observatory, to hand out thousands of reagent kits for free to festival-goers.

The reagent kits are not a perfect solution. Unlike comprehensive laboratory-quality services, such as GCMS, reagent kits are limited to only testing for a few substances, do not provide exact percentages of the chemical contents, and are more easily corrupted by user error. However, they are legal to purchase in Australia and can provide drug users with life-saving information. By testing for adulterants such as PMA, they can alert ecstasy users to the presence of potentially fatal adulterants.

Furthermore, the provision of the kits offers the opportunity to promote safer drug use to users and their peers. It's an opportunity to stop and think about the potential risks and how they can be managed. Included with the kits are expert-written handbooks, explaining the limitations of reagent testing, what safer ecstasy usage looks like, and further resources that encourage safer drug taking practices. By

demonstrating to drug users that harm reduction advocates prioritise their safety, the kits will also encourage users to consider how they might engage in safer drug use and how to access support services if required.

Reagent testing kits are only an interim step on the path to fully supporting safer drug usage; not a complete answer. As a result of governments refusing to respond to urgent calls for comprehensive drug checking services, SSDP has decided to act where they will not, and will support university chapters nationwide to follow Melbourne University's example in introducing the provision of free reagent testing kits to their students.

Until our political leaders respond to the health crisis of preventable drug related harm and accept the evidence of harm reduction measures such as pill testing, SSDP Australia will continue to encourage individuals and organisations to take what actions they can to reduce the risks and harms of drug use in the community.

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If you would like more information about this topic, please contact Tim Fraser at 0401 051 981 or email at hello@ssdp.org.au.



The banner features the SSDP logo on the left, which includes the text "ssdp" in a large, bold, white font, with "Students for Sensible Drug Policy Australia" written in a smaller font below it. To the right of the logo are four social media and contact icons: Facebook, Twitter, a website icon, and an email icon, each followed by its respective contact information.

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