

Pill Testing



Position statement

This statement provides evidence-based recommendations for the establishment of pill testing services throughout the country.

Introduction

Pill testing, also known as drug checking, or drug safety testing, is a harm reduction resource that involves the employment of scientific equipment and personnel to analyse illicit drugs and educate prospective consumers. Multiple methods of analyses are used for pill testing, which include, but are not limited to, gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS) and the use of reagents (Barratt, Kowalski, Marier and Ritter, 2018). Pill testing also permits the establishment of early warning systems which notify health professionals, law enforcement, consumers and the public about dangerous batches of drugs appearing on the black market. Such early warning systems are already operating in Europe and significantly reduce drug-related harms (Giné, et al., 2018; Brunt, 2017). As pill testing services spread throughout European countries, harmful drug use and overdose have become less common, while drug health services have improved.

Pill testing in Australia has been shown to reduce dangerous drug use by enabling people to learn about adulterants and the potential outcomes of drug consumption without having to consume drugs (Makkai, et al., 2018; Day, et al., 2018; Giné, et al., 2018; Johnston, et al., 2006). Pill testing also provides an access point to drug treatment and other healthcare and social welfare services (Barratt, Kowalski, Maier and Ritter, 2018; Giné, et al., 2018; Makkai, et al., 2018) much like safe consumption spaces (Semaan, et al., 2011). Drug harms are disproportionately experienced by young people, and more than 82% of young people want access to pill testing services (Lancaster, Ritter and Matthew-Simmons, p. 66, 2018).

SSDPAus believes that:

- Pill testing reduces drug harms and does not increase drug use, producing benefits for both people who use drugs and the broader community.
- Pill testing is consistent with state and national drug policy, as outlined in Australia's National Drug Strategy.
- Community and political opposition to pill testing typically ignores research evidence illustrating the effectiveness of pill testing. Further delaying public access to this resource undermines the capacity of alcohol and other drug treatment providers to reduce drug-related harms.
- Countries with access to pill testing have avoided batches of drugs containing lethal substances, while these same batches have caused harms in countries without access to pill testing. "Drug-checking services, by executing warning campaigns, can cause hazardous drugs to be quickly removed from the market" (Brunt, p. 13, 2017).

Rationale

Pill testing aims to address three interrelated problems commonly associated with drug use: 1) the increased availability of new and unknown psychoactive substances; 2) drug misidentification, and; 3) overdose. Pill testing has been a success abroad (Brunt, et al., 2016). There are 31 pill testing services operating worldwide, which have shown that drug use does not increase following the introduction of pill testing (Brunt, 2017). In April 2018, Australia's first public pill testing service provided further evidence that pill testing reduces the consumption of deadly substances (Makkai, et al., 2018). There are professional, scientific organisations in Australia with the personnel and technology available to make pill testing a reality. While politics place the provision of pill testing in a complex position, legality is not a barrier (Byrne, Gock, Cowing & Faunce, 2018). Australian drug policy, alongside the advance of scientific research, provides an opportunity to make pill testing in Australia a reality.

SSDPAus' resolution

SSDPAus recommends that Australian federal, state and local governments support the establishment of publicly accessible pill testing services for all people who use drugs. This includes facilities both at temporary locations, such as music festivals, and at fixed locations, such as hospitals, needle and syringe providers and consumption rooms.

We resolve to continue to advocate for the establishment of pill testing in Australia and to challenge opposition that is not evidence-based. We pledge to promote harm reduction and cohesion between people who use drugs and society more broadly and to disseminate this position statement throughout our networks. We will engage in research, consultation and discussion to ensure these services are effective and viable.

References

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