

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, 2013).

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). Pill testing impacts on the behaviour of people consuming drugs, leading to consumption moderation and drug disposal. Pill testing also impacts upon drug markets more broadly, as consumers share test results and seek reimbursement (Measham, 2018).

Rationale

20% of illicit drug products contains a substance that a consumer does not anticipate, and this number jumps to 40% at public events (Measham, 2018). This produces three interrelated problems which pill testing aims to remedy: 1) the increased availability of new and unknown psychoactive substances; 2) drug misidentification, and; 3) overdose. The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction have demonstrated the efficacy of pill testing throughout Europe (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.

Additionally, so long as Australian governments continue to ignore these recommendations, SSDPAus recommends that drug users (and distributors) use multi-use reagent test kits and the cross-referential use of 2 or more reagents (eg. Mecke, Marquis, Mandelin). SSDPAus also recommends that other institutions which support and engage with young people and drug users should implement harm reduction programs that include educational workshops and the distribution of free/subsidised reagent kits in a model similar to the ‘Safer Partying Initiative’ program SSDPAus developed at the University of Melbourne in collaboration with the University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU) and Dancewize, a program of Harm Reduction Victoria (HRVic). Though we stress that reagents are a rudimentary drug checking method, and that there are other methods for best practice, such as Fourier-transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR) and GC-MS.

References

Barratt, M., Kowalski, M., Marier, L., Ritter, A. (2018) *Global review of drug checking services operating in 2017*, Drug Policy Modelling Program, National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, Bulletin 24, 1-12.

Brunt, T. (2017) *Drug checking as a harm reduction tool for recreational drug users: opportunities and challenges*, European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, accessed 6/11/2018, http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/system/files/attachments/6339/EuropeanResponsesGuide2017_BackgroundPaper-Drug-checking-harm-reduction_0.pdf

Brunt, T., Nagy, C., Bucheli, A., Martins, D., Ugarte, M., Beduwe, C., Vilamala, M. (2016) Drug testing in Europe: monitoring results of the Trans European Drug Information (TEDI) project, *Drug Testing and Analysis*, 9(2), 188-198.

Byrne S, Gock A, Cowing A, Faunce, T. (2018) Australia's first official illicit pill testing at Canberra's Groovin' the Moo music festival: Legal hurdles and future prospects, *Journal of Law and Medicine*, 26(1), 54-60.

Day, N., Criss, J., Griffiths, B., Gujral, S., John-Leader, F., Johnston, J., Pit, S. (2018) Music festival attendees' illicit drug use, knowledge and practices regarding drug content and purity: A cross-sectional survey, *Harm Reduction Journal*, 15(1), 1-8.

Giné, C., Vilamala, M., Measham, F., Brunt, T., Bücheli, A., Paulos, C., Valente, H., Martins, D., Libois, B., Tögel-Lins, K., Jones, G., Karden, A., Barratt, M., (2017) The utility of drug checking services as monitoring tools and more: A response to Pirona et al., *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 45, 46-47.

Johnston, J., Barratt, M., Fry, C., Kinner, S., Stoove, M., Degenhardt, L., George, J., Jenkinson, R., Dunn, M., Bruno, R. (2006) A survey of regular ecstasy users' knowledge and practices around determining pill content and purity: implications for policy and practice, *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 17(6), 464-72.

Lancaster, K., Ritter, A., Matthew-Simmons, F. (2013) *Young people's opinions on alcohol and other drugs issues*, National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, Australian National Council on Drugs, 66.

Makkai, T., Macleod, M., Vumbaca, G., Hill, P., Caldicott, D., Noffs, M., Tzanetis, S., Hansen, F., (2018) *Report on Canberra GTM Harm Reduction Service*, Harm Reduction Australia.

Measham, F. (2018) Drug safety testing, disposals and dealing in an English field: Exploring the operational and behavioural outcomes of the UK's first onsite 'drug checking' service, *International Journal of Drug Policy*, in press.

Semaan, S., Fleming, P., Worrell, C., Stolp, H., Baack, B., Miller, M. (2011) Potential role of safer injection facilities in reducing HIV and hepatitis C infections and overdose mortality in the United States, *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, 118(2-3), 100-10.

Authors

Liam Engel, Michael Tanner, Tim Powell, Marco Stofanovik, Alice Pierce, Gulliver McLean, Nicholas Kent