

## PILL TESTING / DRUG SAFETY TESTING

### Thorne Harbour Health's position

Pill testing, and drug safety testing services more broadly, allow people to make informed decisions about drug consumption and reduce drug-related harm. Mobile and fixed site drug safety testing services should be implemented immediately.

### Summary

- Drug safety testing can determine the chemical content and purity of substances, and provide an opportunity for trained providers to educate consumers about the potential harms of drug use.
- Wherever drug safety testing services have been trialled and implemented they have resulted in many people limiting their drug use and discarding drugs, as well as in the removal of dangerous batches of drugs from the market.
- Given their clear potential to save lives, mobile and fixed site drug safety testing services should be rolled out immediately.
- State and territory governments and police agencies should work together to ensure that that drug safety testing service providers and their clients are not targeted for arrest or prosecution.
- A national drug testing agency and national drug warning system should be established.

### Background

#### Risks from an unregulated drug supply

Prohibition of illicit substances has resulted in their unregulated supply, which means production of these substances does not occur in a quality-controlled environment, and as a result their chemical content and purity is not known. Drug related harms often arise because people consume substances with higher than expected levels of purity, which can result in overdoses, or because they unknowingly consume toxic substances.

#### Novel psychoactive substances

The risks of unregulated drug supply are being compounded by the advent of novel psychoactive substances (NPS). The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime reported several hundred NPS in 2015, and the number continues to grow.<sup>1</sup> NPS are a range of drugs that mimic the effects of existing recreational drugs, such as cannabis, cocaine, and ecstasy. Drug suppliers produce NPS as substitutes for banned substances, but they will often sell NPS as though they are better known drugs. As a result, people consume drugs they never intended to take, or at higher levels of purity than expected, increasing the risk of overdose. For example, in early 2017, NPS sold as ecstasy in Chapel Street, Melbourne, led to 3 deaths and 20 hospitalisations.<sup>2</sup>

## **Drug safety testing reduces drug-related harm**

Information about the exact chemical content and purity of substances enables people to make more informed decisions about how, or indeed whether, they will consume such substances. For example, knowledge that a drug that one intends to consume is highly pure might lead one to take less of it, thereby reducing the risk of overdose. Knowledge that it contains a highly toxic chemical might also lead one to dispose of such pills instead of consume them. In this way, drug safety testing services prevent many of the harms associated with drug use. They also provide an opportunity to provide harm reduction information and educate people about their drug use.

## **Drug safety tests**

Laboratory testing is the most accurate drug testing method; however, it is more costly than other testing methods and can take days to produce a result. Reagent test kits are readily available and include low-cost chemicals that, when mixed with a sample of a drug, can broadly indicate what it contains. Although rudimentary, using multiple reagents and triangulating the data increases the potential to identify NPS and other recreational drugs. They also provide additional evidence that the drug is what the person believes it to be. However, reagent test kits cannot provide information about the purity of a drug.

A range of other tests can be used together to provide more accurate information about both the content and purity of drugs, including but not limited to: thin layer chromatography, high-performance liquid chromatography, gas chromatography/mass spectrometry, and direct analysis in real time.<sup>3</sup>

While on-site analysis, however sophisticated, remains less accurate than laboratory testing, it is far better than no drug testing at all, and has been used effectively overseas. It can provide information, when and where needed, about the content and purity of drugs. This information, when shared with drug consumers, can potentially reduce the risk of fatal overdoses.

## **No evidence drug safety testing increases drug-taking behaviour**

Drug safety testing services have provided invaluable intervention opportunities, and there is no evidence to show that they increase drug-taking behaviour. Ninety-three percent of patrons who attended the pill testing pilot at Groovin the Moo in Canberra in 2018 indicated that it was not the first time they had used illegal drugs.<sup>4</sup> By enabling trained peer testers to engage with populations that typically avoid mainstream health services,<sup>5</sup> drug safety testing services have resulted in people discarding dangerous drugs in several countries around the world, including but not limited to the following:

- *The United Kingdom* – Fiona Measham of The Loop reported that two thirds of people dispose of their drugs after testing reveals they are not what they expected.<sup>6</sup> The Loop has also found that 40% of people who keep their drugs after testing report they intend to take a smaller amount, thereby reducing the risk of overdose and medical incidents on site;<sup>7</sup>
- *Portugal* – 24% of the LSD capsules tested at a festival did not contain LSD but did contain other substances, and 74% of the people who received this information reported that they would not consume the capsules;<sup>8</sup>
- *United States of America* – after results indicated that a drug believed to be MDMA did not contain any MDMA, 74% of respondents indicated they would not consume the drug;<sup>9</sup> and

- *New Zealand* – 30% of drugs checked in the summer of 2016 were not what people expected them to be, and half of the respondents changed their minds about using a substance when testing showed it was not what they thought it was.<sup>10</sup>

## Current practice

### International drug safety testing services

Drug safety testing services have operated in several countries for over two decades, including the above-mentioned. As an example of best practice, the Netherlands has an extensive Drug Information and Monitoring System that allows individual consumers (as opposed to drug manufacturers or suppliers) to obtain low-cost testing, both at drop-in centres and with on-site test providers at venues and festivals.<sup>11</sup> These services have helped remove dangerous batches of drugs from the market;<sup>12</sup> drugs that resulted in users' deaths in countries that lacked these services.<sup>13</sup> Importantly, results entered into this national surveillance system allow for monitoring of emerging substances and inform public policy and practice.<sup>14</sup>

### The Australian context

A Guardian Essential Poll conducted in 2019 found a clear majority of respondents supported pill testing, including 57% of Liberal/National voters, 73% of Labor voters, and 74% of Greens voters.<sup>15</sup> The Parliamentary Budget Office recently costed a Greens policy initiative involving the operation of 18 drug testing sites, as well as an Australian drug testing agency and national drug warning system at only \$16 million per annum.<sup>16</sup>

In Australia, although reagent test kits are legal and available online and in certain retail locations, their relative inaccuracy makes them less effective at preventing drug-related harms. Moreover, because reading results requires comparison of the used reagent's colour with a colour chart, results are prone to misinterpretation at venues without adequate lighting. Despite their limitations, given the absence of better options, people who use drugs report using reagent test kits themselves.

Young Australians are aware of the harms associated with drug use and are engaging in a range of strategies to mitigate those harms. An Australian study of 851 people, predominantly young adults who reported using drugs at nightclubs and music festivals, found that 93% were willing to pay up to \$5 per test.<sup>17</sup> It also found that 90% were already trying to find out what was in their drugs, with 53% reporting they had consulted pill-report websites and 23% that they used test kits or advanced testing services (e.g. sending drugs to overseas services for analysis).<sup>18</sup>

Results from a pill testing pilot conducted in Canberra showed that it is a significant and positive intervention for minimising drug-related harms.<sup>19</sup> MDMA was the most commonly found substance, present in 51% of samples, followed by filler/cutting agents at 20%.<sup>20</sup> Other drugs found in the samples include MDA, MDEA, ketamine, cathinone, and caffeine; other substances and materials included antihistamine, fibre, foodstuff, general chemical oil, protein, and toothpaste.<sup>21</sup> Forty-one percent of the participants reported that they were very surprised at the result of the test, and 19% reported they were somewhat surprised.<sup>22</sup> Thirty-five percent reported they would change their use patterns, while 7% were undecided.<sup>23</sup> Eight percent reported they would discard the drugs, while 11% were still unsure about what they would do.<sup>24</sup> This is consistent with other international findings.

Handling of illicit substances is prohibited under various Australian state and territory laws.<sup>25</sup> Exemptions that allow handling of such substances are required for drug safety testing services, similar to existing exemptions for safe injecting facilities.<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

Pill testing and other drug safety testing services inform people about the content and purity of NPS and other recreational drugs, allowing them to make more informed decisions. Internationally, wherever such services have been trialled and implemented they have been effective at reducing drug-related harms. Evidence clearly shows that drug safety testing does not increase drug consumption. Rather, people often choose to discard drugs or limit their drug use. In line with the available evidence and community expectations, drug safety testing should be implemented in Australia.

## Recommendations

1. Establish training and certification schemes to enable community health organisations to provide drug safety testing services, using similar technologies to those proven effective internationally.
2. Adopt a model of peer and community-based testing to further minimise barriers to client interaction and promote the widespread use of drug safety testing.
3. Establish mobile and fixed site drug safety testing services as part of a coordinated drug information and monitoring system, similar to that of the Netherlands.
4. Governments should make any and all necessary legislative and regulatory changes to allow trained professionals of drug safety testing services to legally possess and handle illicit substances for analysis.
5. State and territory governments and police agencies should work together to ensure that drug safety testing service providers and their clients are not targeted for arrest or prosecution.
6. Establish a national drug testing agency and national drug warning system.
7. Fund a trial of drug safety testing services.

## References

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<sup>10</sup> KnowYourStuffNZ, '2017/18 results – Which drugs have we found so far?' (Online article) <<https://knowyourstuff.nz/our-results/>>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Safety Testing Advisory Service at Festival and Events (n 4).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid 20.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid 20.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid 22.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid 21.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid 23-24.

<sup>25</sup> Butterfield (n 14) 145.

<sup>26</sup> *Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981* (Vic) ss 55K, 55L, 55N; *Drug Misuse and Trafficking Act 1985* (NSW) ss 36N, 36O, 36P.