



Pill Testing Saves Lives.

Position Paper
November 2019

No Harm, No Discrimination

atdc
Alcohol, Tobacco and other
Drugs Council Tasmania

The ATDC supports pill testing based on the evidence of its effectiveness as a harm reduction strategy.

The ATDC calls for the convening of an advisory committee of relevant stakeholders and experts to investigate options for trialing pill testing at Tasmania's music festivals and events.

Summertime in Australia goes hand in hand with music festivals. A time where our young people should be enjoying themselves during a well-earned break from their studies or work commitments. Unfortunately the 2018-2019 summer season will be remembered as one that was plagued by multiple drug related deaths and serious illness at music festivals across Australia, and a moment-in-time when community calls for pill testing was the loudest than in any other time in history. This includes Tasmania.

Nationally, there is growing awareness that regardless of moral views or the legality of illicit drug use, the reality is that people, particularly young adults, take drugs and will continue to despite the government's and community's efforts to prevent drug use.

This drug use is evidenced through the 2016 National Drug Strategy Household Data Survey, that identified 43 per cent of Australians over 14 years of age reported using an illicit drug in their lifetime. Despite it being down the list of illegal substances ingested (behind marijuana, misuse of pharmaceuticals and cocaine), Australians are among the leading consumers of ecstasy in the world with 2.1 million of our population having used the drug at least once, and three per cent taking it at least once a year.

“

Death and serious illness can be minimised by allowing suitably qualified and trained personnel to conduct pill testing

”



The real problem lies in the fact that recreational party drugs, like ecstasy and MDMA are unregulated, meaning the quality and strength is anyone's guess with manufacturers often 'topping up' the pills with potentially deadly ingredients which cannot be detected until it is too late. People taking these pills are not aware of the composition of what they are taking and have no way of informing themselves.

This is where pill testing is critical, because death and serious illness from drugs taken at music festivals can be minimised by allowing suitably qualified and trained personnel to conduct pill testing in environments where we know that drug use is common, such as music festivals and events.

Drug analysis services, commonly known as pill testing, work by analysing a small sample of the pill (including powders or liquids) with results being available within 15 minutes. Pill testing stations aim to prevent people from taking dangerous or contaminated substances, while also giving the health staff conducting the testing a unique opportunity to provide face to face advice to people about the risks of drug taking.¹

Pill testing is now common place at music festivals in Europe and has proven to drastically reduce and even eliminate deaths. Testing first emerged in the early 1990s in the Netherlands where it is now part of national drug policy and pill testing services are routinely available in Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Spain, Portugal and France.

Since the introduction of pill testing, Portugal has had zero deaths at music festivals, and research from Austria found that 50 per cent of those who used the drug testing service believed that the results influenced their drug taking behaviour. Two thirds decided not to consume the drugs that were shown to have impurities, and those who took them anyway, consumed less than planned and said they would warn their friends of the inherent risks.²

The results of Australia's first pill testing trial at the *Groovin the Moo Festival* in Canberra in 2018 proved the merits of pill testing.³ Of the 128 festival goers who had their drugs tested, five threw their pills in the amnesty bin provided after receiving the test results and 42 per cent of those who had their drugs tested said that their drug taking behaviour would change as a result of the testing. Drugs belonging to two festival attendees were found to contain n-ethyl pentylone, an often lethal substance responsible for mass overdoses in Europe in recent years – both pills were discarded.



Pill testing is now commonplace in Europe and has proven to drastically reduce and even eliminate deaths



Dr David Caldicott, Emergency Consultant at the Emergency Department of the Calvary Hospital in Canberra led the pill testing team at *Groovin the Moo*. Dr Caldicott reported that after analysing these potentially fatal pills "the Healthcare Commander of the festival and the Chief Health Officer of the ACT knew about them within 5 minutes. No hospital, no law enforcement, nothing and nobody works it out that fast and that is part of the beauty of this process."⁴

¹ For more information on the merits of pill testing and its evaluation, see <https://ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/ndarc/resources/Global%20review%20of%20drug%20checking%20services%20operating%20in%202017.pdf>

² European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, *Inventory of on-site pill testing in the EU*, accessed at <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/html.cfm/index1577EN.html> on 7 January 2019.

³ Refer to Groovin the Moo Final Report for more detailed information on its success - <https://www.harmreductionaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Pill-Testing-Pilot-ACT-June-2018-Final-Report.pdf>

⁴ Claudia Long (2018) *Pill testing at festivals has hidden benefits that could reduce drug taking*, ABC News, accessed at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-07-20/pill-testing-splendour-in-the-grass/10008522> on 7 January 2019.

The second pill testing trial in Australia, also conducted at the *Groovin the Moo* festival, in Canberra in April 2019 again highlighted the success and benefits of pill testing. The pill testing service tested 170 substances for 234 festival patrons, almost twice the number from 2018. Seven pills containing (aforementioned) n-ethyl pentylone were identified during the testing, with all patrons immediately discarding the pills in the amnesty bins.

All patrons who visited the service were spoken to about the health and safety risks in relation to any form of drug use with many patrons stating that the information they received would change their behaviour by reconsidering consumption or taking less of what they had in their possession.

This rare opportunity for health professionals to speak to people about their drug use (known as a brief intervention) is an integral part of the pill testing process.

During the 2019 festival:

- 208 brief interventions were recorded with patrons, averaging 9 minutes
- 206 of 208 patrons gave their age during the brief intervention – the average age was 19.7 years
- 160 of 208 patrons disclosed they had used drugs previously
- 27 of 208 patrons disclosed a health condition or being on other prescription medications so medical staff were able to discuss and warn of these additional risks
- 51 of 208 patrons took hard copy resources as part of their visit to the service.⁵

The much anticipated NSW Coroner's report into six music festival deaths was released in early November 2019, with Deputy State Coroner Harriet Grahame recommending pill testing, a ban on police sniffer dogs, a reduction in strip searches and a coordinated approach between NSW government agencies to minimise the harm associated with illicit drug use at festivals. Coroner Grahame recommended both mobile and onsite pill testing stations at music festivals, as well as a permanent fixed site pill testing facility in a community based organisation. Evidence given at the Inquest confirmed that prohibition and 'Just say No' messaging does not work and despite well-resourced law enforcement attempts at eradicating drug use, this has not stopped young people experimenting with illicit drugs. In fact, the Inquest found that a strong police presence and drug detection dogs may cause significant harm in a festival environment with young people consuming their illicit drugs in dangerous ways including panic ingestion, pre-loading, and double dosing.⁶

The ATDC acknowledges that young Tasmanians engage in risky behaviours, and is of the view that we can, and should, attempt to maximise their safety and reduce the potential harm from illicit drug use. If young Australians were dying in high speed car accidents, in workplace accidents or participating in extreme sports at the same rate as they are at music festivals, there would be public outcry for changes to how we mitigate risks associated with such activities. Yet our young people who experiment with drugs are currently not being afforded the same care and protection.

⁵ Report on the 2nd ACT GMT Pill Testing Pilot: a Harm Reduction Service, Pill Testing Australia, August 2019.

⁶ <http://www.coroners.justice.nsw.gov.au>

Societal concerns about pill testing include the fear that that endorsing pill testing gives the impression of condoning illicit drug use. Common reported concerns is that pill testing is merely 'quality assurance for drug dealers', or that it encourages drug use. The ATDC strongly opposes this view. Both Dr Caldicott and Professor Alison Ritter, Director of the Drug Policy Modelling Program at UNSW say that there is no research or evidence to support the view that pill testing increases drug use. Both say pill testing is about targeting people who already have the intention of consuming illicit substances and helping to mitigate their risk. The Alcohol and Drug Foundation supports this view and states that '*drug checking does not promote illicit drug taking, and people who choose to get their substances tested have already purchased them with the intention to use them.*'⁷

“

It is the ATDC's position that the zero tolerance/criminal justice approach cannot continue to be the only approach

”



There is also concern that pill testing is not always particularly accurate, and that proper analysis of pills requires sophisticated laboratory equipment and suitably qualified technicians and medical staff. Through credible organisations, such as Pill Testing Australia, Tasmanians have access to the contemporary technology and staff to provide pill testing services in our State. Pill Testing Australia welcomes the opportunity to be involved in pill testing in Tasmania.

Another concern is that pill testing services could leave people with a false sense of security that the makeup of the pill is 'safe'. This is not the case. The onsite staff at pill testing stations are qualified health professionals and do not endorse drug use, or promote any illicit drug use as safe. The inherent risks involved in drug taking would be provided to Tasmanians, in a non-judgemental safe environment. The 20 minutes whereby an individual is waiting for the results of the analysis, provides a rare opportunity for health professionals to discuss drug use, risks and harm reduction strategies – this opportunity for a brief intervention should not be undervalued.

Arguments for and against pill testing in Tasmania comes down to the issue of whether we continue to only take a zero tolerance/criminal justice approach to drug taking at music festivals and events, or do we adapt and incorporate additional harm reduction approaches.

It is the ATDC's position that the zero tolerance/criminal justice approach cannot continue to be the only approach, and that adopting harm reduction approaches, in this case pill testing, is critical. It is an evidence-based approach that will reduce the risk of drug related deaths or serious illness in Tasmania.

⁷ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/health/2018-12-21/guide-to-pill-testing-at-australian-music-festivals/10638732>

Harm reduction approaches align with the Australian National Drug Strategy that endorses illicit drug harm minimisation through services such as the availability of needle and syringe programs, opioid substitution programs and supervised injecting centres (currently available in New South Wales and Victoria). Providing information and advice about the toxicity and risks associated with illicit drug use is no different.⁸

The ATDC's position on pill testing is echoed by the Royal Australasian College of Physicians, the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, the Australasian College for Emergency Medicine, the Rural Doctors Association of Australia, the Australian Medical Association, the Australian Nursing Midwifery Association, the National Australian Pharmacy Students' Association, the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia, the Forensic and Clinical Toxicology Association, the Public Health Association of Australia, Family Drug Support Australia, and the Australian Drug Law Reform Foundation. At the local level, it is also supported by Tasmanian community organisations including Health Consumers Tasmania, the Youth Network of Tasmania, the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre and Community Legal Centres Tasmania. A trial is also supported by the Hobart City Council.

Tasmania has regular music festivals, including Falls Festival, Dark Mofo, and Party in the Paddock, and the ATDC is concerned that it is only a matter of time before a young Tasmanian dies, or suffers serious illness. Therefore, the ATDC supports the introduction of pill testing at Tasmanian music festivals and events, as a matter of urgency.

As such, the ATDC is calling for the convening of an advisory committee of relevant stakeholders and experts to investigate options for trialling pill testing at Tasmanian music festivals and events.

Pill testing will strengthen our harm reduction strategies, produce valuable new data and information on illicit drug use in Tasmania and most importantly, save lives.

⁸ For more discussion on how pill testing fits within the current National Drug Strategy, see <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5891912/>