

Don't do drugs is a message that we've all heard.

Tasmanians have been told time and time again throughout their lives that taking drugs not prescribed by a doctor is bad, and against the law.

Yet Tasmanians do take illegal drugs, and for our youth who are actively seeking opportunities to be adventurous, experimenting with illegal drugs continues to be a part of that journey for many.

I don't say this because I condone it, I say it because it's true.

Armed with the knowledge that young Tasmanians are likely to take risks with illegal drugs, it is only natural that we would seek ways to minimise the risk of harm, particularly in environments where we know that drug use happens, such as music festivals and events.

One method that has saved lives both here in Australia and overseas is drug checking.

Drug checking is a simple concept where people can visit a drug checking booth at a festival or event, and have any party drugs they may have purchased tested for dangerous substances before they take them.

Substances like paint and glue or dangerously high levels of drug purity that could lead to poisoning or death.

Drug checking has been proven to save lives, yet it's not legal in Australia and attempts to make it so continue to be challenged.

This is because to allow drug checking could be seen as condoning or normalising the use of illegal drugs, something that we've been told we shouldn't do.

Allowing drug checking also requires police to turn a blind eye to those getting their pills tested, which is at odds with illegal drug possession being a criminal offence.

Tasmania will have the opportunity to consider these issues this week when the Tasmanian Greens table amendments to the Misuse of Drugs Act to allow pill-testing services to be provided at festivals and events across Tasmania.

It's not the first time the Tasmanian Greens have attempted to introduce amendments to allow pill-testing, with an unsuccessful attempt in 2016.

At that time the attempt was met with comments that these measures were seeking to provide quality assurance for 'drug pushers' and promoting drug use.

These concerns are understandable, but harm-minimisation strategies such as pill-testing are not designed to undermine the efforts of our law enforcement professionals or to benefit those who illegally produce or sell drugs.

They are designed with the focus on saving lives, and reducing the harm that drugs have in our community.

In April this year, more than 125 people accessed a pill-testing service trialled by the ACT government at the Groovin the Moo music festival where half of the drugs tested were contaminated, with some classified as deadly.

In September this year, New South Wales lost two young people to overdose, and as many as 700 people sought medical assistance at the Defqon.1 music festival where drug checking was not legally available.

The risk of this happening here on our island is arguably just a matter of time after Tasmania Police charged one person with drug trafficking and issued 30 others with drug cautions at the Falls Festival in January this year.

We must never stop attempting to shut down illegal drug operations but we must not wait until someone dies at one of our events to question what else we could have done to help people make informed decisions about taking those drugs.

Illegal party drugs don't come with a warning label or a place of origin sticker and nor do they come with a list of ingredients or a guarantee that they were made in a clean and safe environment by people who know what they're doing.

They are made by people who are not concerned for the health and safety of those who take their drugs, so we must be.

It's important for Tasmania to seriously consider how we can make drug checking work harmoniously alongside our existing community and law enforcement drug strategies.

We have done it before, and we can do it again.

Over 20 years ago in 1993, when Tasmania introduced its first needle and syringe program it was hailed as a 'key public health strategy' minimising the risk of transmitting blood-borne viruses amongst people who inject drugs.

Yet the origins of needle exchange programs across Australia were fraught with the same issues that pill-testing is facing now, including the challenge of finding a balance between a justice and health response to drug use in our community.

They managed to find that balance, and there are now over 800 needle exchange programs across Australia and people are no longer at risk for being arrested for providing, or accessing, life-saving services.

The introduction of pill-testing in Tasmania won't change the message that illegal drugs are bad for us and against the law.

They are, and will continue to be but this isn't enough to stop people from taking them.

It's been proven that people are less likely to take party drugs once they know what's in them, but this is only possible with pill-testing services.

Pill-testing in Tasmania will send a strong message that our community that we're leaving no stone unturned in the battle to reduce the harm of drugs in our community, including up until the very moment when those drugs may make it into the hands of our most vulnerable, providing them with every opportunity to make sure they make it home.