

# PILL TESTING AUSTRALIA

## FACT SHEET

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**The overarching aim of pill testing is to provide a direct health service to save lives by:**

1. Providing the opportunity for people to be informed and consider a range of issues before determining whether to consume or how to reduce harm when consuming an illicit drug;
2. Reducing the number of people potentially requiring an ambulance call out, as well as attending hospitals, police holding cells and courts as a result of consuming unknown drugs - which in turn provides a range of individual, family and community based positive outcomes;
3. Obtaining a range of street samples for detailed testing that allows for both community health warnings on new compounds and assists law enforcement intelligence on illegal drug manufacturing and importations; and
4. Provide an environment where an independent assessment of pill testing can be conducted in a manner rarely if ever undertaken previously.

The service operates as a stand-alone service within close proximity to the medical area and is staffed by health professionals, analytical chemists and peer workers. Staff provide discreet and private advice to patrons wishing to have any pills checked for content and potency prior to consumption. Patrons utilising the service are also provided with health and harm reduction information and advice.

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### **The impact of pill testing on drug use**

#### **PILL TESTING CAN PREVENT DEATHS.**

In 2014, the Netherlands' official pill testing service, DIMS, found a lethal batch of pills containing the toxic chemical PMA. This immediately triggered a national mass media campaign, including radio and television broadcasts, social media posts, and alerts at live music events. There were no deaths. In the UK, where no such service was in place at the time, four people died after consuming pills from the same batch. In Switzerland, it has been reported that since the implementation of the pill testing service SaferParty in Zurich, there have been no ecstasy-related deaths.

#### **PILL TESTING CAN REDUCE HOSPITALISATIONS.**

The introduction of pill testing at one UK festival in 2016 occurred during a time when festival drug-related incidents in the UK were at their highest on record. The number of drug-related hospitalisations at this festival reduced by 95% from the previous year, from 19 hospitalisations to one.



## PILL TESTING CAN LEAD TO A REDUCTION IN DRUG USE.

Data collected in 2015 by the Canadian organisation ANKORS found that, of those accessing pill testing services in Canada, one-third (31%) of individuals were more likely to discard their substance when the result indicated it contained harmful chemicals. Similarly, a survey by Check It, Austria's largest pill testing service, found that two-thirds of people who accessed pill testing services decided they would not consume a substance if it was found to contain harmful chemicals.

In the UK, one-third of festivalgoers and 30% of night club attendees said they would most likely or definitely not consume a substance if the test result was unexpected. This was followed up by findings from UK service The Loop and North American service DanceSafe, which have reported a 25-100% discard rate of substances that yielded an unexpected test result.

And a recent joint study by researchers in Australia and the United States, which surveyed individuals at electronic dance events in New York City, found a majority of recipients reported they would be less likely to use ecstasy if testing found it contained 'bath salts' or methamphetamine (54.8% and 54.3% respectively).

A comparison of countries with and without pill testing services indicated no evidence of an increase in rates of drug use or mortality in countries with these services.

## PILL TESTING CAN FACILITATE ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE INFORMATION.

People – particularly young people – are more likely to be receptive to a service with a 'peer-to-peer' style of health care provision, such as pill testing than compared to campaigns promoting "just say no". Research shows young Australians are highly supportive of pill testing; a survey of over 2,300 young people by the Australian National Council on Drugs revealed 82% of recipients support implementing pill testing in Australia.

Evidence from research conducted by Austrian pill testing service Check It found 58% of people who use the service would not otherwise seek out harm reduction information, and about 75% are more likely to access harm reduction services if pill testing is included.

There are similar reports from Spanish service, Energy Control and UK service, The Loop, both of which found that a great majority of people who visit pill testing services have never accessed this type of service before. Indeed, contrary to the opinion of many commentators, young Australians are sensible when they are presented with information that they believe, and know that they can trust. Part of the problem in Australia right now is that young people are ignoring advice that they see to be unsubstantiated and morally driven. Providing a pill testing service serves to reverse that opinion, and re-engage a demographic that regards current messaging as not being credible.

We are dealing with a group of people who are attending a music festival in possession of drugs that they already have the intent of consuming. In the absence of any other intervention, the presence of a pill testing service won't make it any more likely that they would consume the drugs they have brought into or bought at the festival. The idea that most people, when provided with information about the content of their drugs, will ignore that information, regardless of its nature, greatly underestimates the inclination of this generation to preserve their health. Pill testing may not be able to stop all consumers from taking their drugs, but it can certainly alter 'how' they take their drugs (taking fewer drugs, mixing fewer drugs...) in such a way as to avoid

them coming to harm. In addition, 'fear-based' health policy has little credence today. We have a far better idea of what actually works, and that's a collaborative approach with the target population, providing them with information that is context specific to them, to allow them to make their own decisions.

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## The Process

Pill testing is a health and medical service. Our pill testing service at music festivals operates in a clinical environment, removed from the festival attractions, that is focussed on providing health information and advice. The patron journey is as follows:

- Patrons seeking to use the pill testing service form a queue that is concealed from passers-by.
- Service users enter the first section of the controlled service delivery space and are greeted by peer-based harm reduction workers. After an initial screening for capacity to consent to using the service, visitors led to the induction area and advised of safety guidelines and provided with an overview of what to expect throughout the service process. The greeters can refer to the medical advisors if there is any concern about the wellbeing or capacity of a patron during this stage.
- Visitors are asked to relinquish phones for duration of their time in the tent for the purposes of privacy, and sign consent waiver, both of which are stored in a safe.
- Whilst in induction area, visitors are assigned unique numerical identifier; each visitor also receives blank business card with same identifier for their own reference
- Visitors are introduced to the independent evaluation team
- Eligible and consenting service users are invited to participate in a survey with initial pre-test evaluation questions; these relate to demographics, the type of substance the patron expects and how they obtained it
- Visitors are next led to chemical testing area where they provide a sample for analysis directly onto the testing equipment, as PTA staff do not handle the samples, which are destroyed in order to produce the results of the chemical analysis
- The results of the chemical analysis are shared with the service user by members of the chemist and medical teams: If the result is expected (e.g. MDMA), the participant is told of the risks of MDMA consumption. If the result is an unknown/dangerous chemical, the visitors is told of the risks that this chemical provides, and it is confirmed for the service user that their sample is not the substance they had expected. In both cases, visitors are warned of the potential for adverse health consequences such as overdose or death and provided with the opportunity to discard any remaining product in the pill testing service's secure biohazard bin.
- Medical staff post colour-coded test results on bulletin board (white = expected, yellow = unexpected, red= specific hazard)
- Visitors are then shown to the health promotion and harm reduction education and referral area for a Brief Intervention with peer-based harm reduction workers. This is an opportunity to discuss the results of the chemical analysis in relation the individual service user's bio-psychosocial risk profile.
- Those participating service users are finally invited to complete the post-test evaluation questions with the independent evaluators, which includes questions on whether the result is expected, their intention regarding the substance, and their experience of the service, including whether a follow-up is possible some weeks later.
- Visitors led back to induction area to pick up their phones, and exit via entry/exit point

What needs to be stressed is that our pill testing service is a holistic and thorough process that engages patrons in discussions about their drug use; it is not just a simple process of testing, results and departure for patrons, as is often portrayed by those un-informed about our service. It is also often the first time that some patrons actually engage with a health professional about their drug use. The benefits of these interactions with our peers and health professionals, in terms of educating and informing patrons cannot be understated, including the potential to reduce future harm.

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## Myth Busting

### UNSKILLED PEOPLE ARE CONDUCTING PILL TESTING

The testing is conducted by qualified chemists, who volunteer their time and expertise to provide the service. At GTM 2019, the testing team was led by Associate Professor Malcolm McLeod, a senior chemist from the Research School of Chemistry at the Australian National University, who is an expert in analytical chemistry and drug metabolism. Together the testing team is one of the most qualified in the country. In Vienna, it is the biomedical chemists from the University of Vienna that conduct the testing.

### IT'S THE ECSTASY KILLING THE KIDS

That's not always the case but even when it is, that's why having a health and medical team in a tent beats hoping and praying. Ecstasy can be variable purity and our chemistry and medical experts can warn the young people about the risks of encountering high purity drug. Evidence from research conducted by Austrian pill testing service Check It found 58% of people who use the service would not otherwise seek out harm reduction information, and about 75% are more likely to access harm reduction services if pill testing is included.

### BODIES ARE DIFFERENT AND WILL RESPOND IN DIFFERENT WAYS

True. And that's why having an emergency doctor at a festival reviewing the testing and consulting the young people is better than the current regime of "just say no." We explain that the safest way to use ecstasy is not at all. Sometimes that works but sometimes it doesn't. When it doesn't, the next safety net we set up is to remind them again that ecstasy has the potential to kill.

### AND IF THEY SAY THEY WILL TAKE THE DRUG?

Our health team runs through the next precautions – to crush and dab the pill. To see how they are feeling within 20 minutes. To ask anyone – a police officer or a paramedic – or to get back to the tent if they are in trouble.

### PILL TESTING WILL LEAD TO MORE DRUG USE

A comparison of countries with and without pill testing services indicated no evidence of an increase in rates of drug use or mortality in countries with these services.