

# Pill Testing - the discussion so far

It is important to state at the outset that drug use can never be conceptualised as risk-free and pill testing is not a magic bullet solution. This paper argues instead that for certain users in certain settings, pill testing is about providing young people with information about drugs and their use, so they can make more informed choices to limit the associated harms, as well as making important practical changes to the settings in which drugs are used.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike regulated pharmaceutical drug products which must adhere to strict production standards, illegal drug markets have long been associated with harms arising from poor product safety. These harms typically arise due to contaminated and adulterated products, which can cause poisoning, or unintentional overdose by users who have no knowledge of the strength and purity of the drugs they may be taking.

Pill testing is a service that invites ordinary citizens to anonymously submit samples of illegal drugs for forensic analysis and provides individualised feedback of results as well as counselling as appropriate. Ideally, armed with information on the purity and composition of their drugs, would-be users are able to make an informed decision on whether or not to take them.

## Evidence from overseas

Pill testing services have been operating in some form for around 25 years in a number of countries. It emerged in the early 1990s in the Netherlands, where it is now part of official national policy. Similar initiatives have since been implemented in other European countries including Sweden, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Spain and France, where they are primarily administered and funded privately. Organisations such as DanceSafe, operating in the USA, focus on harm reduction through peer-education. In Europe, this is typically undertaken in mobile facilities located near

or inside venues to allow timely feedback to users (approx. 30 min). Results are then 'posted' anonymously on information boards or event websites (often using red/yellow/green colour-coding), so users can review feedback clearly and discreetly. These practices are possible through partnerships between event promoters, healthcare services and local police, and a strong harm reduction philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

Many positive outcomes have emerged from pill testing overseas, including:

- Research suggests that pill testing can change people's decisions around drugs, resulting in reduced harm to users. It has been shown to positively affect users' behaviour, contradicting claims often used as the rationale for criminalisation that 'soft' options encourage increased uptake and use, particularly among youth.
- Evaluation of the chEckiT project in Austria reported approximately half of users whose drugs were tested indicated that information about quality/purity would influence their decision to take them. If presented with a negative result, two thirds reported they would not consume their drugs and would also warn friends against consumption.
- Research from the Netherlands revealed no increases in the use of most party-drugs (or poly-drug use) because of pill testing and provision of drug information.
- Evaluations of the reforms in Portugal showed that pill testing, as part of a wider public health approach, reduced problematic use, related harms and burden on the justice and healthcare systems.
- Research from Berlin and Switzerland found that after pill and powder testing was implemented, the actual ingredients of tested pills corresponded more and more to the expected ingredients of those drugs, rather than containing mostly contaminants.<sup>3</sup>
- In the UK, two-thirds of users consulted by not-for-profit testing service The Loop said they would not take drugs found to contain harmful substances. More than half said test results had affected their consumption choices and many said they intended to dispose of their drugs or take less of them.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Groves, Andrew (2018), 'Worth the test?' Pragmatism, pill testing and drug policy in Australia. Harm Reduction Journal, Volume 15: no.12, <https://harmreductionjournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12954-018-0216-z>

<sup>2</sup> Groves, Andrew (2018).

<sup>3</sup> Claudia Long (2018), Pill testing at festivals has hidden benefits that could reduce drug taking, ABC News, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-07-20/pill-testing-splendour-in-the-grass/10008522>

<sup>4</sup> Claudia Long (2018)

Furthermore, good practice guidelines for pill testing exist in Europe, covering the broad principles for the establishment, delivery and evaluation of services for a range of "nightlife" interventions.<sup>5</sup>

## Arguments for pill testing in Australia

To begin with, it's hard to go past the report on the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) *Groovin the Moo (GTM) Pill Testing Pilot: A Harm Reduction Service*. Pill testing as a harm reduction service at the ACT GTM can be described as an overwhelming success. The report of the pilot found that:

*"...establishing a 'front-of-house' pill testing model - as was the case with this pilot - is clearly possible and practicable and offers peer-based brief interventions, counselling and referrals as a central part of a holistic approach that encompasses harm reduction with a pragmatic focus on both demand and supply reduction."*

The report concluded,

*"The development of a uniquely Australian pill testing service model that involves peers, health professionals and law enforcement officials working together to reduce harm amongst drug users needs to be prioritised and supported by all Australian governments."<sup>6</sup>*

This study and others have formed their argument for pill testing based on the following:

- Pill testing has been shown to change the black market, with products publicly identified as dangerous being found to leave the market.
- Ingredients of tested pills begin to correspond to the expected components over time, suggesting that pill testing can place pressure on manufacturers to refrain from using adulterants in drugs.
- Pill testing changes behaviour, with research suggesting that negative results deter a majority of people from consuming drugs and spur them to warn their friends.

- Visits to pill-testing booths create an opportunity for providing support and information over and above the testing itself. It has been shown to increase users' motivation for subsequent participation in follow-up counselling sessions, providing impetus for support of peer-education and peer-led interventions.
- Visits to pill-testing booths enable drug services to contact a population that is otherwise difficult to reach because these people are not experiencing acute drug problems. Indeed, the intervention has been used to establish contact and as the basis for follow-up work with members of not-yet-problematic, but nevertheless high-risk, groups of recreational drug users.
- Pill testing enables the capture of long-term data about substances in the drug market and the potential for a warning system against new, unexpected, or very dangerous drugs and consumption trends. It enables monitoring of drug-forms, patterns of consumption and the characteristics of users.
- Pill testing provides drug users the opportunity to be informed and consider a range of options before determining whether or not to consume an illicit drug.
- Pill testing reduces 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 delivers a range of individual, family and community based positive outcomes.
- Obtaining a range of street samples for detailed testing allows for community health warnings on new compounds and assists law enforcement intelligence on illegal drug manufacturing and importations to Australia.
- Testing can also involve offsite analyses prior to events, encouraging planning among users, though it is less common as these services often require users to provide identification, increasing the perceived risks of being identified by police.
- Young drug users often dismiss government messages as untrustworthy, and are better persuaded by well-informed peers or professionals.

A wealth of empirical data reveals considerable community support for pill testing, challenging punitive criminal justice responses to drug use. A survey conducted at a major Australian music festival in 2016 demonstrated that

5 Ventura et al (2013), Drug checking service good practice standards, EU Nightlife Empowerment & Well-being Implementation Project (NEWIP), [http://newip.safenightlife.org/pdfs/standards/NEWIP\\_D\\_standards-final\\_20.12-A4.pdf](http://newip.safenightlife.org/pdfs/standards/NEWIP_D_standards-final_20.12-A4.pdf)

6 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. <https://www.harmreductionaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Pill-Testing-Pilot-ACT-June-2018-Final-Report.pdf>

This report was prepared by the Safety Testing Advisory Service at Festivals and Events (STA-SAFE) Consortium June 2018. The STA-SAFE consortium consists of: Harm Reduction Australia Australian Drug Observatory, Australian National University Noffs Foundation DanceWize, Harm Reduction Victoria Students for Sensible Drug Policy Australia.

most participants (86.5%) believed testing services could help to reduce harm for users. These findings describe a cohort that values information and seeks to engage in safer practices, regardless of whether they use drugs.

A similar result was identified in a more recent sample of users at Australian dance-parties or music festivals, where 90% reported seeking information about drug contents in the last 12 months. Most of these respondents (60%) had encountered unexpected substances or problems with drug purity during this period, which motivated them to alter their behaviour with more than half warning friends (51%), many deciding not to consume their drugs (39%), and more than a quarter reducing the amount they consumed (28%). Most respondents also reported they would use a form of self-testing (94%), onsite event testing (94%) or a fixed-site (i.e. 'drop-in') service, and valued services that provided comprehensive, individual feedback rather than only when dangerous results were found.

This reinforces previous claims that young people can be persuaded to make rational decisions and are willing to use testing services, which may elicit positive behavioural change at the time of use, reducing some drug-related harms.<sup>7</sup>

There is also support<sup>8</sup> for the trial of pill testing in Australia among public health organisations and some federal parliamentarians. This is not only for the reason of harm minimisation but also because it has been shown that pill testing provides an opportunity for Australia to participate in the development of science in this field, to inform the evidence base for future policy and practice and to provide a direct, immediate harm reduction intervention that is already widespread across Europe.

During the Canberra (ACT) trial, the pill testing unit identified two substances linked to overdoses in Europe and New Zealand. One

of those substances – n-ethylpentalone – hadn't previously been known to be available in the ACT, and the pill testing team was able to inform health authorities in real time. Waste water testing is unlikely to provide cutting-edge intelligence on rare substances like ethylpentylone or substances that are emerging and yet to be characterised.

Dr David Caldicott, clinical senior lecturer at the ANU Medical School and member of Calvary hospital's emergency unit, who led the pill testing team at Groovin' the Moo after pushing for pill testing at festivals for a number of years, noted:

*"When we completed that analysis of the n-ethylpentalone, the healthcare commander of the festival and the chief health officer of the Territory knew about it within five minutes. No hospital, no law enforcement, nothing and nobody that works it out that fast, and that is part of the beauty of this process."<sup>9</sup>*

Clearly, pill testing offers the opportunity to provide such 'just in time' intelligence to both police and health services. The Canberra trial was so successful that Harm Reduction Australia (HRA) (part of the STA-SAFE Consortium, which ran the Groovin The Moo trial) has launched a major fundraiser, seeking to raise \$100,000 to help support the roll out of pill testing programs at more Australian music festivals.<sup>10</sup>

## Arguments against pill testing

In a recent Parliamentary Library Flagpost<sup>11</sup>, Matthew Thomas wrote,

*"Perhaps the main arguments against pill testing are that, firstly, on-site tests have a limited capacity to accurately detect harmful substances, and, secondly, by permitting on-site pill testing, contradictory messages are being sent about the risks related to the use and possession of controlled substances."*

7 Groves, Andrew (2018)

8 Tom Iggulden (2018), Pill testing at music festivals will save lives, politicians say after Groovin the Moo trials Updated 1 May 2018, 9:52am writes: Politicians from across the divide say more pill testing trials at music festivals will save lives. "How many funerals do we have to go to of people that have taken these substances and found out they're not what they're sold?" federal Liberal backbencher Warren Entsch said. Federal Labor backbencher senator Lisa Singh said: "If we are going to get serious about harm minimisation, then pill testing at a health facility at a music festival without fear of police needs to be an option." The comments followed an Australia-first pill testing trial at Canberra's Groovin the Moo festival on Sunday.

9 Claudia Long (2018)

10 Tom Williams (2018), \$100k Fundraiser Launched For Pill Testing At More Aussie Festivals, Music Feeds website, <http://musicfeeds.com.au/news/100k-fundraiser-pill-testing-aussie-festivals/>, <http://musicfeeds.com.au/news/100k-fundraiser-pill-testing-aussie-festivals/#oZ9EouIKPysWqBHJ.99>  
Matthew Thomas (2018), The pros and cons of pill testing, Parliamentary Library Flagpost, [https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/FlagPost/2018/May/The\\_pros\\_and\\_cons\\_of\\_pill\\_testing](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/FlagPost/2018/May/The_pros_and_cons_of_pill_testing)

11 Matthew Thomas (2018), The pros and cons of pill testing, Parliamentary Library Flagpost, [https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/FlagPost/2018/May/The\\_pros\\_and\\_cons\\_of\\_pill\\_testing](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/FlagPost/2018/May/The_pros_and_cons_of_pill_testing)

Thomas referred to the concerns regarding the usefulness of on-site pill testing raised by Andrew Leibie, a scientist with Safework Laboratories and a member of the International Association of Forensic Toxicologists<sup>12</sup>. These were summarised as follows:

- On-site drug testing is fast and easy, but not particularly accurate. Proper analysis of pills requires highly sophisticated laboratory equipment and can take days of work by trained scientists.
- On-site pill testing kits are severely limited in what they detect, with test kits unlikely to detect contaminants or other toxic compounds in pills.
- On-site tests cannot test for concentration and high doses of ecstasy and methamphetamine, which are often fatal by themselves.
- On-site tests cannot detect new designer drugs on the market, such as NBOMes or 'N-Bomb', which has been linked to three deaths in Melbourne in 2017.

Leibie also expressed the concern that pill testing services could leave consumers with a false sense of security that the party drugs they buy may be safe, when this is not the case.

Thomas concludes,

*"It should be noted that in his critique Leibie focuses on the limitations of colourimetric tests and other on-site test kits, in comparison to laboratory testing. However, these limitations are well documented, and, according to Dr Monica Barratt, a researcher with NDARC, acknowledged by most pill testing services.<sup>13</sup> Barratt argues that pill testing services only use such kits as their main tool when they don't have access to better technology. Fully-funded pill testing services typically use proper laboratory equipment, as was the case at the Groovin the Moo festival."<sup>14</sup>*

## Conclusion: Harm minimisation versus zero tolerance

Arguments for and against pill testing are largely informed by broader debates about the merits of harm minimisation versus zero tolerance approaches to illegal drugs.

From a harm minimisation perspective,

completely eliminating a drug or drugs from society is an unrealistic aim that often causes more harm than good. As a result, we would do better to restrict the damage caused by them, even if this means an overall increase in the use of drugs.

From a zero tolerance standpoint, illicit drug use should be prohibited under any circumstances. Harm reduction measures—such as pill testing— it is argued, can encourage and enable drug use, keep people stuck in a pattern of addiction, and serve as a Trojan Horse for drug law reform and the decriminalisation of drugs.

There is constant tension in Australia between advocates of these perspectives, and frequent calls for a shift in emphasis between demand, supply, or harm reduction measures. However, Australia's broad approach to illicit drugs under the National Drug Strategy remains one of harm minimisation, and the country has in place a significant number of measures to reduce the harms caused by drugs. These include Sydney's Medically Supervised Injecting Centre, needle and syringe programs and opioid substitution treatment.

Pill testing itself is not a radical idea. As a harm-reduction intervention provided by community and local governments, it's available, as described above, in several European countries including the Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria, Belgium, Germany, Spain and France.

Alex Wodak, president of the Australian Drug Law Reform Foundation and advocate for harm minimisation via pill-testing makes the point:

*"How long can political leaders continue to delude themselves that their stern warnings prevent young people from taking drugs at youth music events? How long can they continue to claim, against the evidence, that saturation policing assisted by sniffer dogs substantially reduces the availability of drugs at these events?"*

*In the face of a serious threat from HIV in the 1980s, some political leaders argued that the "best" the community should aim for was people never injecting drugs.*

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Leibie (2017), Pill testing sounds like a great idea, but there's a catch, SMH, <https://www.smh.com.au/opinion/pill-testing-sounds-like-a-great-idea-but-theres-a-catch-20170120-gtvlu4.html>

<sup>13</sup> Monica Barratt (2017), Pill testing is still a great idea, if we use the right equipment, <https://monicabarratt.net/pill-testing-is-still-a-great-idea-if-we-use-the-right-equipment/>

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Thomas (2018)

Fortunately, saner voices prevailed. The "good" that was accepted was reducing the spread of HIV among people who injected drugs by providing sterile injecting equipment."<sup>15</sup>

According to Dr Caldicott, there are two things that change young people's minds about drug taking:

*"The idea that what they're taking could kill them and the idea that they've been ripped off. We're able to provide both of those messages,"<sup>16</sup>*

Drawing from national and international research evidence, this paper recommends the integration of pill testing into Australia's harm minimisation strategy.

<sup>15</sup> Alex Wodak (2018), The simple question MPs opposed to pill testing should ask themselves, SMH, 16 September 2018, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/the-simple-question-mps-opposed-to-pill-testing-should-ask-themselves-20180916-p50427.html>

<sup>16</sup> Claudia Long (2018)

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