



# Drug Checking Saves Lives.

**Position Paper**

**March 2021**

*No Harm, No Discrimination*

**atdc**  
Alcohol, Tobacco and other  
Drugs Council Tasmania



**The ATDC supports drug checking 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 drug checking 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 drug checking 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.

The real problem lies in the fact that recreational party drugs, like ecstasy and MDMA, are unregulated,



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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 drug checking 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 drug checking in environments where we know that drug use is common, such as music festivals and events.

### **Pill testing or drug checking?**

While testing started with pills in the early 90s, many forms of drugs can now be analysed, including powder, capsules, liquid or crystal.



Drug analysis services, commonly known as drug checking, work by analysing a small sample of the pill (including powders or liquids) with results being available within 15 minutes. Drug checking 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.<sup>1</sup>

Drug checking 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 drug checking services are routinely available in Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Spain, Portugal and France.

Since the introduction of drug checking, 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.<sup>2</sup>

The results of Australia's first drug checking trial at the Groovin the Moo Festival in Canberra in 2018 proved the merits of drug checking.<sup>3</sup> 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.

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Dr David Caldicott, Emergency Consultant at the Emergency Department of the Calvary Hospital in Canberra led the drug checking 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.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 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>

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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>

<sup>4</sup> 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 drug checking trial in Australia, also conducted at the Groovin the Moo festival, in Canberra in April 2019 again highlighted the success and benefits of drug checking. Information from the independent evaluation conducted by the Australian National University showed<sup>5</sup>:

- 234 patrons visited the service:
  - almost twice the number who visited in 2018
  - almost ¼ of the patrons (n=53) were under the age of 18 (\*It is important to note that they were allowed to have their pills tested but were excluded from the evaluation)
  - 22 patrons declined to participate in the evaluation
  - 1 patron knowingly supplied candy to be tested so was excluded from the evaluation
  - 158 valid evaluation participants
- 170 substances were submitted for testing (including 11 samples presented by festival medical staff)
- 147 patrons completed a post-testing survey
- 11 patrons participated in an in-depth follow up interview during August/September 2019
- Seven pills containing a potentially highly harmful/deadly substance, n-ethyl pentylone, were identified. All seven samples were discarded by their owners in the amnesty bins provided

Evaluation data shows that the experience of having a drug checking service and the accompanying harm reduction brief interventions produced a number of positive results:

- Patrons valued the service and rated it highly, and appreciated being able to discuss their drug use in a non-judgmental environment.
- In relation to use, patrons reported:
  - Those with low inclination to use remained uninclined
  - Those with high inclination to use remained inclined to use
  - Those who reported moderate levels of intention to use, increased their intention
  - Those 'most determined' (100%) to use interestingly showed a significant decrease in the likelihood to use the drug after attending the service
- There was a significant improvement in patrons' self-reported knowledge of how to prevent the harms between pre-test and post-test data collected.
- Follow-up data also suggests that most of those who took their drugs after attending the service, reported using harm reduction knowledge to reduce their risks of harm

Also of interest is that only 8% of the evaluation sample reported that they would discard the drugs they had tested. This is a lower disposal rate than reported in other international studies but can be attributed to the fact that there was a high level of concordance between what patrons expected the drug to be and what it was identified as after testing. International research shows that low concordance between expected drug and identified drug is associated with high rates of non-use and disposal.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Australian National University ACT Pill Testing Trial 2019: Program Evaluation (Summary), December 2019

<sup>6</sup> Ross Hollett and Natalie Gately (2019) Risk intentions following pill testing scenarios are predicted by MDMA use history and sensation seeking: A quantitative field study at an Australian Music Festival, *Drug Alcohol Review*, 38, 473-81.



The evaluation highlighted that the information provided to patrons at the different stages during the testing service was an area for improvement. The evaluation recommends careful consideration should be made in developing standardised explanatory language used to deliver the drug testing results, as misinterpretation amongst patrons was commonly reported. Patrons in interviews were using the terms 'purity' and 'strength' to describe the substances that were being tested, and subsequently to make inference about relative safety, which is something which warrants attention as the testing process is currently unable to determine purity and strength. While it is important to note that the misinterpretation did not result in any negative consequence, there needs to be clearer messaging around the testing capabilities/limitations and what the results actually mean.

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 drug checking, 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 drug checking stations at music festivals, as well as a permanent fixed site drug checking 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.<sup>7</sup>

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.

Societal concerns about drug checking include the fear that endorsing drug checking gives the impression of condoning illicit drug use. Common reported concerns is that drug checking 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 drug checking increases drug use. Both say drug checking 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'.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.coroners.justice.nsw.gov.au>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/health/2018-12-21/guide-to-pill-testing-at-australian-music-festivals/10638732>





There is also concern that drug checking 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 drug checking services in our State. Pill Testing Australia welcomes the opportunity to be involved in drug checking in Tasmania.

Another concern is that drug checking 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 drug checking 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 drug checking 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 drug checking, is critical. It is an evidence-based approach that will reduce the risk of drug related deaths or serious illness in Tasmania.

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.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For more discussion on how pill testing fits within the current National Drug Strategy, see <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5891912/>



The ATDC's position on drug checking is echoed by the following Australian peak bodies:

1. Australian Medical Association
2. Public Health Association of Australia
3. Royal Australian College of General Practitioners
4. Royal Australian College of Physicians
5. Australasian College for Emergency Medicine
6. Rural Doctors Association of Australia
7. Australian Nursing Midwifery Association
8. National Australian Pharmacy Students' Association
9. Pharmaceutical Society of Australia
10. Forensic and Clinical Toxicology Association
11. College of Emergency Nursing
12. Australian Nursing & Midwifery Federation
13. Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists
14. Paramedics Australasia
15. National LGBTI Health Alliance
16. Australasian Therapeutic Communities Association
17. Australian Alcohol and other Drugs Council
18. Australian Lawyers Alliance
19. Australian Lawyers for Human Rights
20. Civil Liberties Australia
21. Association of Alcohol and other Drug Agencies Northern Territory (AADANT) Inc

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 drug checking 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 drug checking at Tasmanian music festivals and events.

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