



Minimising harm from illicit drug use through pill testing and drug checking

JANUARY
2019

Position statement

This document outlines the position of the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia (PSA) on pill testing and drug checking, including the role of pharmacists in minimising potential harm from the use of illicit drugs.

While PSA has existing position statements related to other harm minimisation measures including Real-time monitoring of drugs of dependence¹ and the use of Cannabis and cannabinoids for medicinal use², this position statement is limited to pill testing and drug checking of illicit drugs.

About PSA

PSA is the only Australian Government-recognised peak national professional pharmacy organisation representing all of Australia's 31,000 pharmacists working in all sectors and across all locations.

PSA is committed to supporting pharmacists in helping Australians to access quality, safe, equitable, efficient and effective healthcare. PSA believes the expertise of pharmacists can be better utilised to address the health care needs of all Australians.

PSA works to identify, unlock and advance opportunities for pharmacists to realise their full potential, to be appropriately recognised and fairly remunerated.

PSA has a strong and engaged membership base that provides high-quality health care and are the custodians for safe and effective medicine use for the Australian community.

PSA leads and supports innovative and evidence-based healthcare service delivery by pharmacists. PSA provides high-quality practitioner development and practice support to pharmacists and is the custodian of the *Professional Practice Standards for Pharmacists* and guidelines to ensure quality and integrity in the practice of pharmacy.

Summary of PSA Position

- PSA considers pill testing and drug checking to be consistent with the principles of harm reduction and supports further trials to inform the role of pill testing and drug checking within Australia. These trials should occur both at music festivals and also within or near other environments where illicit drug use occurs.
- PSA supports Australia's commitment to harm minimisation outlined in the National Drug Strategy.³ This includes support for initiatives which reduce demand, reduce harm and reduce supply of illicit drugs.
- PSA believes pharmacists have a role in minimising harm from illicit drug use through pill testing and drug checking. Pharmacists should be involved in trials and subsequent implementation of ongoing pill testing and drug checking services.



Background

Illicit Drug Use in Australia

In 2011, illicit drug use was responsible for 2.3% of the total burden of disease and injury in Australia and associated with 33,491 incidents of accidental poisoning.⁴ The 2016 National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) reported 3.1 million Australians (15.6%) aged over 14 years had used illicit drugs in the previous 12 months, with prevalence highest in the 20–29 years age group, where 28.2% people reported illicit drug use within the last 12 months.⁵

Surveys of people attending Australian music festivals have identified a significantly higher use of illicit drugs than the same age group for the general population, with 25%–44% of festival attendees reporting use of illicit drugs in the past month.⁶

Music festivals are frequently associated in media with illicit drug use and risk of harm from their use. Victorian emergency department data from 2008–2010 demonstrates presentations related to ecstasy (and related drugs) peak in summer and often originate from music festivals.⁷ However this data also identifies licensed premises and private residences as locations where a significant proportion of adverse events from 'party drugs' occur.

The prevalence of harm from these drugs is difficult to quantify. Deaths following consumption of substances purporting to contain illicit drugs at music festivals

are widely reported in mainstream media. Fatefully, the harm associated with drug-taking behaviour often does not relate to the expected drug itself, but the harm caused through unknowingly consuming unexpected chemical substances, larger doses, or hazardous combinations contained in the product – either through deliberate or careless adulteration of the substance during illicit manufacture.⁸

Harm minimisation

The principle of harm minimisation has formed the basis of Australia's National Drug Strategy since 1985.⁹ Harm minimisation aims to address alcohol and other drug issues by reducing their harmful effects on individuals and society.¹⁰

The harm minimisation approach is based on the following principles; drug use - both licit and illicit, is an inevitable part of society; drug use occurs across a continuum, ranging from occasional use to dependent use; a range of harms are associated with different types and patterns of drug use; and a range of approaches can be used to respond to these harms.³

Pharmacists' role in harm minimisation

Pharmacists have ethical values of care, integrity and competency. Pharmacists are committed to acting in the interest of the patient, preventing harm, respecting self-determination and ensuring fair and equitable access to care.¹¹ These values and principles are consistent with Australia's harm minimisation approach to the impact of illicit drugs.

Pharmacists have a long and established role in harm minimisation internationally and within Australia.^{12,13} The roles Australian pharmacists provide in harm minimisation include the provision of Opioid Replacement Therapy, needle and syringe programs, and provision of naloxone as an over-the-counter medicine.¹³ However, compared with other countries, Australian pharmacists are still considered underutilised, and could potentially have a more prominent role in minimising harm from the use of illicit drugs.

Pill testing and drug checking

"Pill testing", or "drug checking" is a harm minimisation service which utilises chemical analysis to determine the content and purity of illicit drugs. Pill testing and drug checking aims to inform drug users of the chemical makeup of their drugs and enable them to avoid ingesting unknown, and potentially more dangerous adulterants found in illicit drugs.

Pill testing and drug checking aims to provide consumers with credible information about the risks of consuming particular substances.^{6,14} The intent of pill testing and drug checking is not to provide the impression the tested substances are safe, as they remain illegal and potentially harmful.

The potential benefits from pill testing and drug checking are not just from the testing itself. Visits to pill testing and drug checking sites also create an important opportunity for a health professional to provide tailored support and information on drug use and associated harms to consumers.^{15–17} As experts in the actions of medicines, drugs and other substances on the body, pharmacists should have a key role in this intervention and the provision of such advice.

Pill testing and drug checking provides health professionals and law enforcement agencies with greater awareness of the nature of illicit drugs being consumed, which serves as an early warning system to emerging risks and helps target medical treatments to those who use illicit substances.¹⁷

International experience

In Australia, outside of emergency settings, there are currently no sanctioned pill testing and drug checking services. However, pill testing and drug checking is available in a number of European countries – including, but not limited to

the Netherlands, Austria, Portugal and France.^{6,17} Drug-check service practice standards exist to support service delivery achieve its harm reduction objectives.¹⁸ On-site laboratory-grade testing is superior to the use of chemical reagent kits due to its ability to provide substantially greater insight into the contents of what a tested sample contains.^{6,18}

Evidence from Europe indicates that pill testing and drug checking influences consumer behaviour and might reduce illicit drug use, and associated harms – including death. Of note, research from Austria found that 50% of those that had their drugs tested said the results would affect their consumption choices.¹⁵ Furthermore, when presented with an unexpected or negative result, two-thirds of consumers indicated that they would not consume the drug and would warn friends.¹⁵

Australian Experience

Australia is recognised internationally for its harm minimisation approach to drugs, however, it has not yet formally introduced pill testing and drug checking beyond

ad hoc arrangements at individual music festivals. Local evidence demonstrates that the majority of young Australians are supportive of pill testing and drug checking, and that such services would be used if available.^{8,19}

A small trial (n=83) conducted at a Canberra music festival in 2018 used infrared spectroscopy to test samples provided by festivalgoers, and was closely modelled on European Drug Checking standards.¹⁶ Substances identified through the analysis corresponded with what the patron was expecting in only 43% of samples, indicating high rates of substitution or impurities within products available. Three-quarters of people who brought drugs in for testing received a brief counselling intervention, with 42% reporting an intended change in drug-taking behaviour as a result of the testing. Eighteen percent stated they would either discard the drugs in amnesty bins, or were now uncertain of what they would do as a result of the provided information.¹⁶

PSA supports further research and trials to inform the role of pill testing and drug checking within Australia. This research should have regards for research,

standards and guidelines which have successfully operated in Europe and use this information to evaluate pill testing and drug checking models that maximise achievement of harm reduction objectives in Australia. In particular, best-practice drug-sample testing methods and brief counselling interventions must be adopted.

Role of pharmacists in pill testing and drug checking

PSA believes that pharmacists have a role in minimising harm from illicit drug use.

As the model of testing adopted in Australia emerges through trials at music festivals and other environments, the role of pharmacists in supporting these services will become clearer. As the peak body for pharmacists, PSA is well-positioned to explore and support pharmacists' role in harm minimisation through pill testing services.

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