

NOTES ON PILL TESTING

FAMILIES AND FRIENDS FOR DRUG LAW REFORM

THE VALUE OF PILL TESTING AS A HARM REDUCTION MEASURE THAT SAVES LIVES AND REDUCES THE RISK OF OTHER SERIOUS HARM

1. Five deaths of young music festival patrons that have taken place since the current festival season began in spring 2018 has drawn unprecedented public and political attention to pill testing with a strong support for testing as a practical harm reduction measure likely to avoid these deaths. Matters have reached a tipping point, making it all the more important that all of us committed to drug law reform should do what we can to bring about change. These notes outline the issues as Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform sees them.
2. The harm reduction benefits of pill testing at music festivals are obvious. Deployable testing technology has the capacity to detect with substantial accuracy, particularly harmful ingredients, that have had fatal consequences. Experience shows that patrons heed the advice.
3. As shown by the behaviour of dance festival patrons in the ACT, which hosted the first Australian trial of pill testing, and at dance festivals overseas where pill testing is offered as a standard service, patrons avoid consuming pills they are warned about. Studies report that “that 25 to 100 % of drug users will discard their drugs if they learn that they contain unwanted or unexpected harmful compounds” (Brunt 2017). Testing venues at music festivals provide an opportunity for health workers to engage with patrons on the avoidance or minimisation of the health effects of the pills they are thinking of taking and they enable law enforcement agencies to secure intelligence about new substances and their origin.
4. The chief obstacle to the rolling out of pill testing is the admitted possibility that the measures taken will not guarantee the safety of the drug users. The essence of the problem though is that intense policing and publicity campaigns have not excluded pills from dance festivals and in fact heighten the risk of harm with panicked users downing all at once their pills for the day. Essentially the case for pill testing is made out with the evidence showing that the interventions reduce the risk of death or serious harm.
5. Please draw on the following in your advocacy, whether writing letters to the paper, in social media or in conversations sitting around the kitchen table. We are keen to have feedback in how these notes can be made more useful. Please also draw our attention to any aspect of them that should be improved.

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How pill testing saves lives

6. [Prof Alison Ritter](#) of the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre identifies six reasons why Australia should pilot ‘pill testing’ all of which mitigate risk of fatal consequences of pill consumption:

“First, pill testing has been shown to [change the black market](#). Products identified as particularly dangerous that subsequently became the subject of warning campaigns were found to leave the market.

[Research also shows](#) the ingredients of tested pills started to correspond to the expected components over time. This suggests pill testing might be able to change the black market in positive ways.

Third, pill testing changes behaviour: [research from Austria](#) shows 50% of those who had their drugs tested said the results affected their consumption choices. Two-thirds said they wouldn’t consume the drug and would warn friends in cases of negative results.

Visits to pill-testing booths create an important opportunity for providing support and information over and above the testing itself. They 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.

Finally, pill testing means we can [capture long-term data](#) about the actual substances present in the drug scene. And it creates the potential for [an early warning system](#) beyond immediate users. This is becoming all the more important as new psychoactive substances that may be used as adulterants are appearing more frequently.”

Front and back of house pill testing

7. Front of house pill testing which Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform supports provides on the spot feedback to music festival patrons. An unsatisfactory alternative is back of house testing that “refers to a service that provides information gathering for law enforcement, but may also be available for other engaged emergency management team stakeholders, but not patrons, and the results may or may not be displayed for the benefit of patrons at festivals.”

8. A pilot of front of house pill testing was carried out at the ‘*Groovin the Moo*’ festival in Canberra on 29 April 2018. The group that carried out the pilot described front of house pill testing as “a service that operates for the benefit of patrons at festivals, involves peers as equal partners and works co-operatively with all engaged emergency management team stakeholders, including police.” (STA-SAFE Consortium, 2018).

9. A Victorian parliamentary inquiry into drug law reform in 2018 had before it “a strong consensus in the evidence . . . supporting drug checking”. The report includes an extensive account of the evidence presented to the committee in favour of front of house pill testing, which led to the committee recommending that the Victorian government “facilitate the availability of an onsite drug testing unit” (Victoria 2018). Alas, the results would not be made known to the patrons. The young patrons would first have to overdose before the medical services treating them would be entitled to access the information. That approximates more to harm maximisation than minimisation. Such an approach offends the basic public health tenet that measures that avoid preventable illness should always be preferred to treatment. At the very least it’s cheaper.

Countries where pill testing is carried out

10. Drug checking (or testing) has been introduced in a nightlife setting across Europe and the United States and New Zealand. The drug testing in Europe was initiated in the Netherlands in 1992 and now operates in at least four European countries including Austria, Portugal, Spain Switzerland (Brunt 2017 & Victoria 2018).

Accuracy of testing

11. The analytical equipment used to test the pills at the 2018 *Groovin the Moo* festival in Canberra was Infrared spectrometry, and in particular a Fourier–transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR) utilised in an ALPHA II machine that has shown its reliability at music festivals in the UK, and the drug consumption rooms in British Columbia.

12. Spectrometry reveals a profile of samples of drugs that allows chemists to compare the spectrographic profile of substances that the machine reveals with a library of profiles of known substances: “when reference spectra are available, most compounds can be unambiguously identified based on their IR [Infrared] spectra. It requires only a very small sample size in the range of milligrams or less”

13. The results are complex and thus difficult to interpret so that “experienced chemists and clinicians are important in on-site interpretation and explanation of the results to patrons and for post site analysis” (Harper, Powell, & Pijl, 2017). Such considerations highlight the inadequacy of crude pill testing kits that are commercially available.

Attraction of dance festivals

14. To those of us of a certain age music festivals are confronting. The mystery of their attraction is best captured in the words of their fans such as Angela Wybrow’s celebration of the multi-day Glastonbury festival in the United Kingdom:

The beat of the music goes THUD! THUD! THUD!
As revellers dance around, ankle deep, in thick, gooey mud.
Bedecked in waterproofs and their designer Wellington boots,
The festival goers are all having themselves a right old hoot.

15. Festivals are a promiscuous, mesmerising mix of sweat, mud or dust and flies, beating decibels and pressing crowds. All can add up to a mind bending experience that pills enhance. The attraction, bordering on the transcendental, is well summarised in the following poem by festival goer Hannah:

I've never experienced reality
like I have at a music festival.
It's like a circus,
a wonderland,
a place for unconventional souls.
It's a world inside a world,
a community of love
mixed with hippies and drugs.
It's not a perfect place,
but it comes pretty close
when you are rolling,
or tripping face.

16. The starting point for anyone bent on countering pill usage or any other challenging behaviour associated with music festivals has to appreciate at the human level what their young patrons see in it for themselves. It is patently obvious that no amount of policing can eliminate the desire of many young festival goers to include pill taking.

17. However alarmed and disapproving the parent may be of the hedonistic goings-on at music festivals the chasm of generation and age is bridged by love and a conviction that one’s child should not be treated as a criminal. Young people deserve life, not death.

Attitude of dance festival patrons: pills are preferable to alcohol

18. Warnings of the dangers of pills generally lack credibility in the eyes of young music festival goers: The “government-advocated messages, often viewed as scare

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tactics, are considered tendentious and untrustworthy, and conflict with the individual's idea of self-regulation". (Brunt 2017).

19. A [raver website](#) describes in the following terms the advantages of pills over the dangerous drug, alcohol: "It's cheaper than buying a lot of alcohol especially at festivals. Also, they're easier to get into festivals than your own drinks."

20. There is also the quite common view that pills bring about a cleaner high, in both a literal and metaphorical sense and a softer hangover.

Not a factor of addiction

21. Overwhelmingly, those who pop pills at music festivals are not marginalised drug dependant typified by "a strong desire to take the drug, [and] difficulties in controlling its use". In the words of Brunt, 2017, they are 'drug users that "... have followed in the slipstream of the electronic dance music revolution of the early 1990s and changing nightlife settings [who] are not characterised by high unemployment or major problems in other areas.'" There are likely to be weeks and months between occasions when they choose to down a pill to enhance the experience of a day out. Dependence is much more common among users of opiates and stimulants like crystal methamphetamine. Having said that, many pills sold to festival goers are mislabelled. Many are cut with methamphetamine. This is a reason in itself for pill testing.

Ecstasy

22. Methylenedioxymethamphetamine known as MDMA or ecstasy for short is the quintessential experience enhancer used at dance festivals. While its effects differ from person to person, the [Alcohol and Drug Foundation reports](#) that users commonly report "Feeling happy, energetic and confident" and experience heightened senses of sight, hearing and touch." While regarded as the least harmful of pills used at music festivals, ecstasy is associated with severe side effects including death. The death of Anna Woods from ecstasy led to a campaign by [her parents highlighting](#) the danger of pills and against harm reduction measures like pill testing. Even so, the dangers of ecstasy can be reduced if not eliminated by accurate first-aid advice. Dehydration and overheating are the most common risks associated with its use. It is important to keep hydrated while on ecstasy. Drinking water does not dilute the effects of ecstasy, but it prevents dehydration. However, drinking too much water may lead to brain swelling and in some cases coma and death ([Family Drug Support](#) website).

Ineffectiveness of policing.

23. In spite of assiduous and sincere efforts by law enforcement agencies for decades, experience shows that that intense policing does not deter significant drug use at dance festivals nor prevent the distribution of new, lethal designer drugs that are continually appearing on the illicit market.

24. Sniffer dogs too have been assessed by the New South Wales Ombudsman to be ineffective and thus a costly waste of money serving only as a feel good

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gesture that police and government are seen to be doing something about a matter of intense community concern:

“The use of drug detection dogs in general drug detection operations does not significantly assist police in targeting drug suppliers. Overwhelmingly, the use of drug detection dogs led to searches where no drugs were found, or to the identification of mostly young adults in possession of very small amounts of cannabis for personal use.

“There is little or no evidence to support claims that drug detection dog operations deter drug use, reduce drug-related crime, or increase perceptions of public safety. Further, criticisms of the cost-effectiveness of general drug detection operations appear to be well founded” (NSW Ombudsman, 2006)

Harm of policing

25. The police and politicians would have the community believe that a high profile police attendance will keep festival patrons safe by deterring them or dealers from bringing pills to festivals. The experience of years and the testimony of patrons give the lie to this illusionary claim. Typically the few pills that a patron plans on taking can be easily secreted on or in their body and the smell masked from detection by sniffer dogs.

26. Worse, police presence escalates the danger to patrons who, panicking at the prospect of search and detection down there pills in one fell swoop, thus increasing the likelihood of overdose.

Appreciating risk

27. Politicians are typically uncomfortable in promoting policy options involving levels of risk. This is one of the main reasons why drug policy is such a contested domain of public policy. Families and friends was founded by those who would have wished their deceased family member or friend had never got mixed up with drugs but assessed that that death would have been of avoidable had policy response been other than that it had been. Risk averse politicians have yet to reach this conclusion. It is all the more reason to celebrate and congratulate Australian governments of the 1980s that placed harm minimisation at the core of Australia's drug policy – policy aimed at reduction of harm to the minimum and not necessarily its elimination.

28. It is much, much easier to argue a black-and-white case like prohibition. Drugs produce harms which would not be incurred if one did not take them. Drug policy directed at eliminating their availability and consumption is therefore the obvious way to go. Hence the abstinence based approach of Drug Free Australia and its affiliates remain the ideological counters to those like Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform that advocate harm reduction and harm minimisation.

29. The influence of these two approaches waxes and wanes. In the Howard years Bronwyn Bishop almost overturned harm minimisation. Currently the pendulum has swung back to harm minimisation but, as the current debate on pill testing

shows, governments still balk at following where the evidence points. For a lot, the fantasy of a drug free dance scene continues to have more appeal than the complexity of finding the optimum set of measures that reduce harm to the minimum. So often, therefore, the perfect becomes the enemy of the good. The perfect drug free world collides with the world as it is. Fantasy versus reality.

30. Sadly, politicians who are happy to espouse harm minimisation, as most do, do not have the courage of their convictions. They are easily beguiled by the siren voices of those opposed to pill testing who preach a simplistic just say no approach: [“Advice from Victoria Police tells us it can give people a false, and potentially fatal, sense of security about illicit drugs”](#). The [New South Wales Deputy Premier](#) made the same point in attacking the Labor Opposition's support for pill testing: “Young people have always experimented, but how many others might be tempted to dabble in drugs if NSW Labor is telling them their pill is ‘safe’? And is Michael Daley going to say to his kids, ‘drugs are OK if they’ve been tested’?” Pointing out this disjunction between commitment to harm minimisation and advocacy of the just don’t pop a pill message is a cogent counter to that simplistic message.

That pill testing sends a dangerous message that drug use is safe

31. Advocates of abstinence can be relied upon to seek to counter any new harm reduction measure with the claim that it sends the message that the consumption of drugs is safe, will encourage drug use and thus increase rather than reduce harm. The Victorian Minister for Mental Health put it this way in rejecting pill testing in his state: It is here that the advocacy of harm reduction becomes most difficult. But there are three clear-cut answers. The first is that experience shows that pill testing saves lives. In the words of a European study: “Over the years, there have been cases of certain batches of drugs containing lethal substances causing deaths in countries without a drug-checking service, but not in countries with a drug-checking service that issues public warnings” (Brunt 2017). No patron died at the ACT festival where pill testing detected lethal substances. Admittedly, pill testing may not guarantee safety, but it greatly reduces the risk of fatalities.

32. The second response is one of values. Do you see the ethical value of preserving a life and well-being most important or do you see drug freeness as the paramount value? Families and Friends has always given a straightforward answer to this question. Measures that preserve life, health and well-being are paramount.

33. Thirdly, empirical evidence has shown time and again that drug policy focusing on the well-being of drug users do not lead to increases in drug use. In the case of pill testing the fear of increased use is unfounded: “It has been shown that drug use does not increase following the introduction of a drug-testing service in a country” (Brunt 2017). The message that pill testing gives is that the well-being of patrons is valued and that they are accorded a service that keeps them safe when they undertake an activity that they are committed to doing. Recently, at a community comorbidity open day, a young woman told me of her experience of testing at the one ACT music festival at which the service was available. She recalled the conversation she had with a health worker. While awaiting the results of the test she spoke with the doctor in attendance about the risks, neither exaggerated

nor dismissed. The service facilitates contact with credible advice and health services.

Addressing fear

34. Politicians feel a political imperative to do something when faced with drug deaths. At one level one might have some sympathy for those who live and die in an adversarial environment with political opponents ever ready to capitalise on misfortunes that they believe they can sheet home to the government. Furthermore, politicians not in government have the luxury of articulating attitudes and solutions however way out and impracticable they may be, without concern that they will be held responsible for the harms that may result if those solutions are implemented.

35. In other words, the fear felt by politicians is a factor that we must always take into account in our advocacy for change. This fear can be turned to advantage if we are able to persuade them that measures we propose are likely to avoid the consequences that they most fear. Furthermore, as much attention should be given to the opposition as to the party in government. Time and again prospects of well grounded, humane and effective change has been torpedoed by opposition politicians seeking cheap political advantage in pandering to community prejudices and fears.

36. Reform of drug policy should be above party politics. We all stand to gain by better drug policies.

Parental blame

37. So very often, the immediate reaction of politicians who feels themselves cornered is to seek to shift the blame to someone or something else. One of the most disturbing aspects of the current pill testing debate has been the attempt to shift the blame to parents, not least by [John Barilaro](#), the Deputy Premier of New South Wales, who slammed pill testing as outsourcing parental responsibility: "nothing", he wrote, "is more important than our words and actions around drugs and alcohol, and the consequences that follow from the decisions our children will one day have the freedom to make". Parents are accused of failing in their duty to bring up their children properly. This is a sad and bitter revival of what was very much around when Families and Friends were formed in 1995 and one that we worked tirelessly to counter. Most telling have been studies of the reasons why young people experiment with drugs. These turn out to be rooted in societal values and personal characteristics of young people that are generally recognised as commendable: searching for self-fulfilment, curiosity, risk taking, winning peer group acceptance and countering feelings of inadequacy that people navigating their teenage years often encounter. Parents, however well intentioned and however assiduous, are largely powerless to counter these societal and psychological factors. Indeed well intentioned, earnest efforts, may well enhance the risk of their children "going off the rails".

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Education

38. One hears it said that education is the answer, if not by parents but communitywide advertising campaigns. The evidence is that such campaigns are a waste of money and ineffective. Indeed, unless very carefully framed so as to address the known societal and personal factors that pique curiosity that motivates experimentation. In other words, more often than not anti drug messaging is a counter-productive waste of resources. They appeal to impatient souls who cannot fathom why anyone is stupid enough to want to experiment with pills, not the target audience.

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