Show some courage on pill testing and save young lives

By Mick Palmer
January 2, 2019 – 3.53pm

Five deaths at music festivals in less than five months. And, if I listen to some critics, the one thing stopping pill testing is that it is seen as people like me giving the green light to drug use.

I need to get my head around this. Me – a 33-year police practitioner and former federal police commissioner – giving the green light to drug use?

The reality could not be further divorced from this view. When it comes to drugs I’m about the straightest guy in town. I’ve never taken any illicit drugs and would love to live in a drug-free world. Of course that has never been the case and never will be.

I would also love to support a “Just Say No” campaign, if it had any chance of success. The reality is, of course, that it never has and never will.

Perhaps the reason for my support for pill testing and wider illicit drug reform, is that I have seen this failure first hand over 35-40 years – including through John Howard’s well intentioned Tough On Drugs policy stance – in an environment of efficient and well-resourced drugs related policing. I’ve seen too many lives
ruined by drug use and abuse; too many families torn apart, and too much heartache caused for too many mums and dads. And it’s no fun delivering a death message.

So to assume people – many of them doctors and scientists and health workers – like us either want to see a pill testing pilot because we want to give the green light to drugs or we are so stupid that we don’t see that it will open the flood gates is oxymoronic.

I don’t envy the task of our leaders and I’m sure there are many who assume that this is a fringe issue. It’s not – a majority of the country wants this because most of us treasure the lives of young Australians. I strongly suspect that this is an election issue that will define how courageous our leaders are and show us who can put politics aside to save lives.

How a government which presides in a jurisdiction in which a medically supervised injecting centre (MSIC) has operated successfully and with undisputable success in Kings Cross over 18 years, can be so vehemently opposed to trialling – or even discussing or considering – pill testing is difficult, almost impossible, to understand.

On the political front pill testing has been polled to death. A clear majority want to reduce the harm at festivals and get pill testing pilots up all over the country. Wouldn’t everyone want to do this?

If these sorts of programs gave a green light to drug use, why didn’t the injecting room in Kings Cross give rise to increased heroin use over a decade ago?

Self-serv ing and ill-informed comments from our leaders are just that. They fly in the face of the evidence and in the face of common decency.

Surely there is only one priority here and that is to try any initiative that may serve to reduce the likelihood of harm and save lives. Surely this is more important than winning an election.
Pill testing took place at Groovin the Moo in Canberra last April. ROHAN THOMSON

For god's sake let's at least have the courage to run a trial and go from there. Former Premier Bob Carr showed courage when supporting the MSIC in Kings Cross at the turn of the century and the benefits are irrefutable.

Instead of Just Say No – how about we say "Just Say No more kids dying on our watch"?

Mick Palmer is former Australian Federal Police commissioner, and policeman and lawyer.
Explainer

What is pill testing, and why is it so controversial?

The recent deaths of young people after taking party drugs at festivals has prompted calls for organised pill testing at events. So what would that look like? And why is it so controversial?

By Yan Zhuang
January 3, 2019 — 7.00pm

In the early hours of the new year, a 20-year-old man died of a suspected drug overdose after attending a music festival in country Victoria. His death followed that of a 22-year-old man after a NSW music festival – the fourth such death in NSW since September. The deaths of these young people have reignited the debate around pill testing.

But what is it, exactly, and why is it so controversial?

Party drugs: they don’t come with a list of ingredients. ALAMY

What is pill testing for?
Recreational drugs can be covertly cut with poisonous or “filler” substances. Uncertainty about strength and purity can lead to accidental overdoses. Pill testing exposes what a tablet really contains and how pure it is.

The basic aim is to enable recreational drug users to make informed decisions about what substances they take.

Pill testing is part of the Netherlands national drug policy – it was introduced there in 1992. Government-sanctioned services have been in Austria since 1997, Belgium since 1995 and Switzerland since 2001. Pill testing is also available in Portugal, France and Spain. Not-for-profit organisations have been testing in the US and Canada since 1999 and in the UK since 2013.

In New Zealand, pill testing is offered at festivals by the volunteer group KnowYourStuffNZ, which is independent but supported by the New Zealand Drug Foundation.

Australia’s first professionally administered pill-testing outfit was in a mobile laboratory at Canberra’s Groovin’ the Moo festival in April. The testers used an infrared spectrometer to identify substances in a sample of each pill.

(Commercially available “do it yourself” pill-testing kits have been used by some festival-goers for years. Each kit contains a solution which, dropped onto a ground-up sample of a pill, will change colours to show the presence or absence of a substance such as MDMA. But these kits cannot confirm dose levels of a particular drug and do not provide information on other potentially dangerous cutting agents.)

How does pill testing work?

Based on the Canberra’s Groovin’ the Moo festival, the process works like this:

- Attendees queue outside a tent in the medical precinct of a festival.
- Once inside, they sign a waiver releasing the testers from liability.
- They also speak to a peer educator to ensure they understand that the test does not guarantee the safety of the drugs. “We’re quite explicit in telling people that this test doesn’t tell you if your drug is safe,” says Dr David Caldicott, an emergency medicine consultant at Calvary Hospital in Canberra and a leader at the Groovin’ the Moo trial. “It just tells you what we’re able to find in your sample.”
- Each attendee provides a sample of their drug to a licensed chemist who photographs and weighs it before putting it under an infrared spectrometer where it is mounted on a piece of diamond and shot with laser light. Through the light reflected, the chemist can tell what is in the sample.
- The attendee then has a consultation with another peer educator to discuss their options now they know what’s in their drug.
In Canberra, of the 83 samples tested in April, just 42 contained mostly MDMA, the active ingredient in the drug known as ecstasy – even though 70 people thought they had bought ecstasy pills. Seventeen of the samples had “fillers” or cutting agents as their main ingredient.

Other substances found included antihistamine, caffeine, dietary supplements, oil, “foodstuff” and toothpaste.

One man discovered that the main ingredient in what he thought was “meth” was actually N-Ethylpentyline, a stimulant that had been responsible for the hospitalisations of 13 people in New Zealand.

Many partygoers change their mind about taking their drugs when they find out what’s really in them.

Does pill testing change people's drug-taking?

There are people at music festivals who’ll never take drugs and those who will take drugs no matter what, says Dr Caldicott. But the biggest group using drugs at music festivals are those whose behaviour pill testers aim to change. “I would say perhaps 80 per cent of people at music festivals are prepared to modify their behaviour if they’re provided information that allows them to do so – and that’s the group we’re targeting.”

Similarly, when people discover that the drugs they have are not the substances they thought they were, about half say they won’t take them, according to Know YourStuffNZ’s Dr Jez Weston. He says his group’s non-judgmental stance is one of the factors in changing behaviour as are the trust and reciprocity involved in the process, the attendees’ involvement in testing and the immediacy of the results.

“Our approach acknowledges the agency of the user,” Dr Weston wrote on scientific blog Sciblogs, “and therefore encourages mature decision-making”.

A recently-published US-Australian study which surveyed ecstasy users at dance parties in New York found a similar percentage of participants reporting they would be less likely to use drugs found to contain unexpected substances.
What do the politicians say?

NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian has said pill testing gives drug users “a false sense of security” and her job as Premier was to keep the community safe.

But following the recent deaths, Ms Berejiklian appears to have softened her stance. “If there was a way in which we could ensure that lives were saved through pill testing we would consider it - but there is no evidence provided to the government on that,” she said.

NSW Opposition Leader Michael Daley recently signalled that pill testing “should not be off the table”.

Former Australian Federal Police commissioner Mick Palmer has urged NSW to consider allowing pill testing. “How a government which presides in a jurisdiction in which a medically-supervised injecting centre has operated successfully and with indisputable success in Kings Cross over 18 years, can be so vehemently opposed to trialling – or even discussing or considering – pill testing is difficult, almost impossible, to understand,” he wrote in *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

In Victoria, pill-testing supporters include the Greens and the Reason Party but the Victorian government is not in favour. “We have no plans to allow for pill-testing at events in Victoria,” Mental Health Minister Martin Foley said in December. “Advice from Victoria Police tells us it can give people a false, and potentially fatal, sense of security about illicit drugs.”

However, Dr Caldicott says, “I can’t fathom how anyone who is in regular contact with young people would believe, ever, that turning up with a shipping container, with some of the most-advanced technology available, with a team of doctors and chemists who, at the very get-go, tell the people presenting to the pill tester that they could die if they use drugs today – it’s beyond me how that encourages drug use.”
Who else is in favour of pill-testing trials?

The Australian Medical Association. And Professor Alison Ritter, from the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, lists several reasons to pilot pill testing. They include that pills exposed as dangerous have been found to leave the black market; ingredients of tested pills start to correspond to the expected ingredients over time; pill testing changes behaviour once the ingredients are exposed; and pill-testing booths offer support and information over and above the actual testing.

“As an emergency doctor,” Dr Caldicott says, “when we give news about somebody being unwell and go, ‘I’m sorry I can’t tell you whether they’ll survive or not’, there is not a parent I’ve ever spoken to who is prepared to turn around and say; ‘Do you know what? As long as their death serves a lesson to others I’m OK with it’.”

Yan Zhuang

Yan is a reporter for The Age.