Pill testing at music festivals will save lives, politicians say after Groovin the Moo trials

AM  By political reporter Tom Iguldien
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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.

About 128 revellers made use of the service.

Among the 85 substances identified were paint and body rub, used to cut illegal drugs.

Severely toxic stimulants were also found and disposed of, pill testing organisers said.

Pill testing 'could help educate young drug users'

Earlier this week, federal Liberal backbencher Craig Kelly said he was against pill testing, though he supported harm minimisation.

He said the service risked encouraging illegal drug abuse by condoning the use of pills deemed less harmful.

But Mr Entsch said the service could provide valuable data to help educate young drug users.

"Drug dealers are not in there in the interests of those wanting to participate in these drugs," he said.

"They are interested in relieving them of their money in any way they can, and they don't give a stuff whether the person gets a high or it puts them in the grave."

Senator Singh, the deputy chair of a parliamentary inquiry that looked into drug law enforcement late last year, said the time had come for a general national conversation about reform of drug laws.

"This is about saving lives, and if that is the message we're talking about here in relation to harm minimisation, then pill testing needs to be part of a suite of harm minimisation measures offered," she said.

In a statement, federal Health Minister Greg Hunt said the issue of pill testing was a state matter.


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Contact Tom Iguldien
Will Pill Testing Prevent Drug Deaths?

Pill testing and pill testing kits have been a hot topic in the media this year, especially around music festivals after several deaths linked to ecstasy pills last year. At Encounter Youth, we know that only a minority of people choose to take illicit drugs and most (if not all) people are aware that they are unsafe. However, pill testing and pill testing kits are being promoted as a way to make drugs 'safer'. So what is pill testing and will it prevent drug-related deaths?

Can’t People Just Buy Pill Testing Kits Online?

Firstly, it is important to distinguish the difference between ‘pill testing’ and ‘pill testing kits’. Pill testing, in the context of something like a music festival, refers to the establishment of a mobile pill testing laboratory. This lab is operated by experts that will obtain a sample of a pill and test it with verified tests. This is in contrast to pill testing kits. These kits are usually purchased online and a person choosing to purchase pills will use the kit to give them an indication of what chemicals may be present in those pills.

The most common pill testing kit is a Marquis Reagent Test. The Marquis Reagent is a liquid which produces a colour reaction when mixed with certain chemicals often found in drugs. For example, if somebody tests a scraping of a tablet that contains MDMA (the chemical contained in Ecstasy), the liquid will turn from colourless to purple/black. However, even if the test shows that MDMA is present, that does not mean the pill is safe. The test will not show how much MDMA is present and will not show how a person’s body will react to this drug.

Another problem is that more often than not, there are other chemicals present as well. For example, tablets sold as ecstasy in 2015, went through comprehensive lab tests. Results published on ecstasydata.org found a total of 134 substances other than MDMA. The Marquis Reagent pill test can, at best, distinguish between 8 of these chemicals. A full suite of seven different pill testing kits can only
but undetected. A mobile pill testing lab may be able to conduct more accurate, comprehensive tests and detect a wider range of chemicals. This is one of many reasons why pill testing through a mobile lab is definitely more preferable than making pill testing kits available for personal use and is what I will focus on for the rest of this article.

Potential Benefits Of Pill Testing

The benefit of testing pills is the potential to reduce harm. The test can give a person choosing to take drugs a red flag that there may be chemicals present that are more likely to cause harm. The person can then be informed about what is really in their pills and how those substances may affect them. There may still be unknowns, such as other undetected chemicals, which means taking those pills is still not safe, but having some information is better than having none.

Another significant benefit of pill testing is that there can be additional trained staff stationed at the lab to talk to the people submitting their drugs for testing. These conversations can be used to stage brief interventions, provide education and connect a person to support services. It gives an additional pathway out of illicit drug use should a person choose to take it.

Finally, the results of the pill tests can be used to track emerging trends in the illicit drug market. These trends can be used to inform law enforcement and provide education to young people about emerging concerns and strategies to stay safe in environments where they may encounter illicit drugs.

Potential Challenges Of Pill Testing

The major challenge is that pill testing can be perceived to be the silver bullet that will prevent drug-related deaths. This is not the case. Illicit drugs are dangerous for many reasons, not least because both their manufacture and their use are unregulated. Illicit drugs can, and do, cause overdoses, even when people are taking what they think they are. It is also never known how a person’s body will react to a drug. Often the stories we hear of a drug overdose, there are many people, even a whole group of friends, who share the same batch of a drug and only one person has the bad reaction.

When considering implementing something like pill testing, there are also legal questions to overcome. What are the duty-of-care requirements for the staff that conduct the tests? How would policing practices need to change around a pill testing station to allow people to submit illicit drugs for testing? Will the staff testing the pills have legal protection, since they will be handling illicit substances? What could the legal consequences be if a person is informed about a dangerous substance in their pills but chooses to take them anyway? These are tough questions. They are important questions to ask and have clarity on before implementing organised pill testing in Australia. A good place to start may be by examining the implementation of the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre (MSIC) in Kings Cross. Many of the legal obstacles to pill testing are similar to that of the MSIC and many lessons could be learned from this successful harm reduction initiative.

Conclusion

Even for legal drugs, the only acceptably safe way to use them is under clinical advice by a registered doctor who understands a person’s medical state and medical history. As we tell students in our Party Safe Education program, by the very nature of their unregulated production and trade, illicit drugs are unsafe. However, the reality is that some people do use illicit drugs and will continue to do so. Pill
A more viable proposal, particularly for events like music festivals, is to have pill testing in a mobile lab. Whilst it requires more resources, this option would allow people who choose to purchase illicit drugs to access accurate information about what may be in a particular pill and support services that can help them. Making pill testing available to people who choose to use drugs is not the silver bullet, but it does give them the ability to make a more informed choice. They ultimately bear the full responsibility for their own choices, but making a more informed choice is always better than making an uninformed one.

Andrew Scholefield – B.Sc PhD

Andrew is our Education Officer and enjoys working to deliver key messages from our Party Safe Education™ program to more young people. Andrew has a background in research and is excited to apply his experience in this area to support the program.
Ban on over-the-counter codeine sales is ‘hurting regional people’

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A ban on over-the-counter sales of codeine has had a massive impact on chronic pain sufferers in regional Australia, according to one woman.
The woman from the NSW Riverina – who did not want to be named for privacy reasons – said the February 1 ban has had unintended consequences, which are hitting people in the bush particularly hard.

She said people who had previously used over-the-counter painkillers containing codeine were now faced with not only the cost of a GP visit and a prescription, but were also increasingly being refused the drugs at all and instead being urged to see a pain specialist.

The woman, who has suffered chronic pain for two decades, said she was prescribed a transdermal patch for an opioid-based medication and had previously bought Panafen Plus over the counter when she suffered hours of “breakthrough pain”.

She said the increased cost was a particular issue for chronic pain sufferers because their medical conditions often restricted their ability to work.

The woman’s experience is that pain specialists are relatively few in number, have long waiting lists, and not all of them bulk bill their patients.

“I found one specialist in Canberra who does bulk bill, but the waiting list is 14 months and growing daily,” she said.

The woman is not opposed to the codeine ban. But she said it seemed to have been introduced without enough thought as to how to help people – particularly those in rural Australia – cope with the changes.

A spokesperson for Pain Australia said other people were reporting the same issues as those raised by the Wagga woman.

The National Rural Health Alliance has this week released the results of a survey that found out-of-pocket medical expenses for some country people amounted to thousands of dollars a year.

The alliance’s chief executive officer Mark Diamond told The Daily Advertiser people in regional areas faced longer waits and had limited treatment options.

Mr Diamond said rural patients had less access to bulk-billed services, and seeking specialist treatments was complicated by distance and cost.

Read more:

- Doctors and patients are divided as codeine is removed from shelves.

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**BETFAIR**

New laws making over-the-counter medications containing codeine available by prescription only will take effect on Thursday.

Doctors and patients alike have been divided by the legislation, which will see products containing codeine from brands including Panadeine, Nurofen, and Codral removed from shelves.

Associate Professor and GP Dr Ayman Shenouda of Glenrock Country Practice said these changes were in patients’ best interests.

"I think it's a good decision because and we often forget codeine is an addictive medication, and before you start patients on addictive medications you need to be mindful of their history," Dr Shenouda said.

"This is all about the helping the patients and looking after them adequately – if you don’t, you could be sending their life into a disaster.”

Dr Shenouda acknowledged that these changes will likely result in longer waiting times and heavier loads on GPs in the region.

"It will affect timing and create a bit of an extra load of work, so there is an extra effort attached, but it's for the best interests of our patients,” he said.

The people making these decisions have never had to be in this situation in their lives, and it's obvious they haven't consulted with people that have been.

A Wagga mother with Crohn’s disease

A Wagga mother, who did not wish to be named, suffers from Crohn's disease and occasionally uses over-the-counter medications containing codeine to manage the chronic pain that accompanies her condition.

She is extremely worried about what the new codeine laws will mean for her and other patients.

"One major side effect is body aches and pains, so it will feel like I’ve got the flu 24 hours a day and seven days a week for two weeks at time,” she said.

"With my disease in particular, it can happen instantly – I’ve been getting ready for work or walking out the front door and then suddenly I’m doubled over in pain."

While the legitimacy of her condition means she will be able to access the medication via a GP’s prescription, she said the issue is more complicated than that.

"I'm going to have to try get into a local GP, but the way I'm seeing it is that I can't afford to keep doing that on top of all my other medical expenses," she said.

"It's hard enough to get a doctor's appointment now, let alone when you're going to have another 100 plus people waiting.

"The people making these decisions have never had to be in this situation in their lives, and it's obvious they haven't consulted with people that have been."

Related coverage:

- [Codeine-based medications to become prescription only](https://www.theherald.com.au/story/5200748/concern-rife-as-codeine-laws-take-effect/)
- [Residents fear new codeine rules will clog medical services](https://www.theherald.com.au/story/5200748/concern-rife-as-codeine-laws-take-effect/)
Doctors and patients divided as over-the-counter codeine medications are removed

- Claudia Farhart

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