

# Keeping Young Canberrans Safe

**Minimising the risk of ACT drug-related deaths  
and illness through information dissemination  
about drug toxicity and availability**

March 2017

**ATODA**  
Alcohol Tobacco & Other Drug  
Association ACT

# 1. ATODA's position

## ATODA:

- *Finds convincing* the available evidence about the efficacy and effectiveness of drug checking/pill testing programs as part of a comprehensive drug harm reduction system.
- *Is concerned* that in some Australian jurisdictions senior decision-makers have rejected proposals to trial drug checking/pill testing without having undertaken any thorough, evidence-based assessments as to the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal.
- *Supports* proposals to trial and carefully evaluate drug checking/pill testing at Australian music festivals, including those in the ACT.
- *Notes* that the ACT Government has a fine track record of underpinning drug policy with good science, and in trialling drug policy innovations where uncertainty exists.
- *Calls on* the ACT Government to convene, or commission another organisation to convene, a Roundtable of stakeholders and experts to investigate options for conducting a carefully monitored and evaluated trial of drug checking at Canberra's music festivals, and on disseminating the findings of drug checking as part of a comprehensive, evidence-informed, drug-harm reduction early warning system. The development and implementation processes would reflect the principles of integration, collaboration, and a staged approach.
- *Expects that* such a trial will lead to the conclusion that drug checking should become part of the ACT's ongoing drug harm reduction and demand reduction strategies. The key intended outcome from such an initiative will be to minimise the harms associated with illicit drug use in our community, and saving lives.

## 2. The drug policy issue

Every year, particularly around the time of the summer music festivals popular with young adults (including dance music festivals), the media report the tragic consequences of young people's drug use at some of these events. This includes drug-related deaths and long-term adverse health consequences from drug toxicity.

A significant proportion of this morbidity and mortality reflects the fact that many of the young people using drugs are not aware of the potency and composition of their drugs, and have no way of informing themselves about these matters.

Furthermore, it is usually the case that the Canberra health and law enforcement authorities know little or nothing about the presence of unusually harmful drugs available at any particular time in Canberra, owing to the absence in our community of a coherent, adequately-resourced, real-time or close to real-time, early warning system about drugs and the chemicals that compose them.

Evidence from Australia and overseas (discussed below) shows that establishing formal, ongoing systems for checking the contents of illegal drugs at music festivals and in other settings, and disseminating the findings both to consumers and to other stakeholders, can produce positive outcomes for people who use drugs, and for the broader community.

Lack of clarity exists about any policy or legislative barriers to establishing formal systems of drug checking (also known as pill testing),<sup>1</sup> and disseminating the findings from such systems, in the ACT community. At the same time, widespread support exists in the community (particularly among young people) for drug checking programs.<sup>2</sup>

ACT Health recently published an article titled 'Developing a pill testing program for music festivals'.<sup>3</sup> It correctly acknowledged that 'Recent media attention to a number of "ecstasy" related deaths in Australia has put the potential of pill testing at music festivals as a harm reduction method into the spotlight' and went on to suggest that there are three main challenges to developing a drug checking service: '...having a service that is reliable, fast, and transportable'. The ACT Health editor noted that 'A pill testing regime is not currently being considered by the ACT Government. The complex philosophical, ethical and legal aspects of a pill testing program are beyond the scope of this article.'

Canberra has regular music festivals, including 'Groovin the Moo' and 'Spilt Milk'. Public health experts have lobbied the ACT Government to establish a trial of drug checking at these events.

ATODA is concerned that the ACT Government is operating in a policy vacuum regarding this aspect of drug harm reduction. It has not yet undertaken a thorough, systematic and publicly transparent policy analysis on drug checking and on disseminating the findings of drug checking as part of a comprehensive, evidence-informed, drug early-warning system. It has not established structures and processes for obtaining advice, from a range of perspectives and experiences, on how a trial of drug checking could be implemented in the ACT, and the strengths and weaknesses of doing so.

### 3. What does the evidence say?

The Australian not-for-profit organisation Unharm describes drug checking, and summarises the evidence underpinning it, as follows:<sup>4</sup>

- *Drug checking services (a successor term for 'pill testing') make the contents of drugs transparent to consumers. Service staff conduct chemical analysis of samples brought by consumers, then interpret and provide the results with information about the risks of consuming the substances identified in the sample.*
- *Services usually conduct brief interventions to identify and support people away from problematic consumption patterns where necessary.*
- *Drug checking services currently operate in about a dozen countries around the world and at present only in one emergency setting in Australia.<sup>5</sup>*
- *Drug checking can be considered a traditional regulatory intervention in markets to control the harms that suppliers would otherwise cause to consumers. Drug checking also*
  - *enables better risk management by consumers,*
  - *creates an opportunity to support people away from problematic consumption patterns, and*
  - *provides timely and valid data about illicit drug markets and products that can be used to improve clinical care and law enforcement.*
- *Drug checking services are timely due to the persistence of illicit markets, the limitations of current regulatory approaches, and the increased risks from the proliferation of high potency and new psychoactive substances.*

A recently promulgated model of decision-making by people who use, or who may be contemplating using, illicit drugs, demonstrates how drug checking services can provide a variety of intervention points. These include the points where people decide whether to use a drug and, if the person chooses to do so, whether they have a pleasurable or unpleasurable experience, and whether they will continue drug use.<sup>6</sup>

The Unharm drug checking policy brief, provides further information on the evidence base for drug checking, drawing especially upon the European experience. After reviewing those services, and their outcomes reported to date, the policy brief summarises the evaluations' findings, as follows:

*A controlled trial would be necessary to identify the full extent to which consumer drug checking influence the supply side of drug black markets but indicative evidence is positive. The Netherlands' Drugs Information Monitoring System (DIMS) found that particularly dangerous substances identified through drug checking services and made the subject of public warning campaigns were eliminated from the market. Programs in Berlin and Switzerland found that the actual ingredients of tested pills corresponded more and more to the expected ones over time.*

*Indicative evidence about the capacity of consumer drug checking services to influence consumer behaviour in ways that reduce risk of harm is also positive. Evaluation of the Austrian project Checkit! found that when presented with a 'bad result', two thirds of people say they will not consume the drug and will warn friends. A recent evaluation of the Portuguese service found that among people who had tested a substance that they thought was LSD, for example, 45% were surprised by the result and 29% reported they would not take the substance. In Australia, a study that asked participants how they would respond in a hypothetical situation where a test indicated an 'unknown' substance found that 76% reported they would not take it.*

*The Netherlands' Drugs Information Monitoring System also shows evidence of the capacity for drug checking services to engage with populations that do not engage with other government messages about drug use. Program staff have observed that 'young drug users often dismiss government messages as tendentious and untrustworthy and are better persuaded by personal contact with well-informed peers or professionals'.*

In ATODA's view, the evidence for the effectiveness of these overseas drug checking/information dissemination initiatives is strong enough to warrant the development and implementation of a carefully trialled intervention in the Australian context, including in the ACT.

### 4. What does this mean for policy workers and decision-makers?

Canberra's people of various ages, but particularly young adults, take illicit drugs and will continue to do so despite the Government's and community's best efforts to minimise the availability and consumption of these substances.

New psychoactive substances (NPSs) are being created, and introduced to the Canberra drug markets, with a frequency never seen before.<sup>7</sup> The chemicals



that make up these drugs, and their levels of toxicity, are largely unknown to consumers, to health workers and to law enforcement personnel.

People who use drugs care about their health and well-being, and the health and well-being of their peers. Work conducted by CAHMA—the Canberra Alliance for Harm Minimisation and Advocacy—has demonstrated that people who use drugs respond well to the health promotion maxim about ‘making healthy choices easy choices’.<sup>8</sup>

The ACT community strongly supports drug harm reduction initiatives<sup>9</sup> with a consequence that the ACT Government is increasingly out of step with community sentiments regarding the life-saving potential of drug checking services and systems at music festivals and other events.

The ACT’s drug policy workers and decision-makers are operating in a policy vacuum regarding emerging illicit drugs. They do not have coherent systems for knowing what drugs are available to consumers, nor how toxic they are. They have no well-developed, well-resourced systems for disseminating information to consumers and other key stakeholders about emerging risks linked to drug use. They are missing out on valuable opportunities to help people who use drugs to make healthy, informed choices about their drug use, based on knowledge of their drugs’ chemical compositions and on alternatives to harmful drug use. They are missing out on valuable opportunities for health promoting engagements around drug checking, including referrals to treatment and harm reduction services, between health workers (including peer educators, Alcohol and Drug staff) and people who use drugs.

## 5. ATODA’s position

ATODA finds convincing the available evidence about the efficacy and effectiveness of establishing drug checking programs as part of a comprehensive drug harm reduction system.

We are concerned that in some Australian jurisdictions senior decision-makers have rejected proposals to trial drug checking without having undertaken any policy analyses, incorporating scientific evidence and diverse experiences and perspectives, as to the strengths and weaknesses of the proposal.

A preferable approach is to trial, and carefully evaluate, drug checking at one or more large Australian music festivals<sup>10</sup>. Canberra’s music festivals, such as ‘Groovin the Moo’ or ‘Spilt Milk’ would be suitable sites for such a trial as they have some 20,000 attendees.

The ACT Government has a fine track record of underpinning drug policy with good science, and in trialling drug policy innovations where uncertainty

exists. ATODA calls on the ACT Government to initiate a thorough, systematic and transparent process that will:

1. Clarify the intended outcomes from conducting drug checking at music festivals both as a stand-alone intervention and as part of a comprehensive early warning system regarding potentially harmful drugs
2. Identify the strengths and weaknesses of proposals to trial drug checking at music festivals such as ‘Groovin the Moo’ and ‘Spilt Milk’
3. Collaboratively with key stakeholders develop realistic options for a Canberra trial of drug checking.

How?

1. ATODA suggests that the ACT Government convene, or commission another organisation to convene, a Roundtable of stakeholders inform this process. Its participants would include expertise from such areas as public health, pharmacology/toxicology, law, policing, public policy, monitoring and evaluation and drug harm reduction (including people with life experience of drug use). It would also include representatives from the music festival industry and young people who attend the ‘Groovin the Moo’ / ‘Spilt Milk’ festival.
2. We anticipate that the Roundtable would clarify the issues requiring more detailed examination, and action, before a trial could be conducted in the ACT. An outcome of the Roundtable might be the establishment of a working group that would develop concrete proposals for a Canberra trial, considering the level and sources of funding required, the scientific/toxicological expertise required, the legal aspects, logistics, the inter-relationships between the intervention and the existing drug treatment and harm reduction services, information dissemination strategies, etc.
3. The working group would clarify the usefulness or otherwise of having the information flowing from drug checking in Canberra being part of a comprehensive, evidence-informed early warning system concerning trends in drug-related harms in our community, and address issues of continuity and sustainability of the intervention.

ATODA is confident that conducting a carefully-monitored and evaluated Canberra trial of drug checking, and of disseminating its findings, using an integrated, collaborative and staged approach, will produce new information that will strengthen the ACT’s drug harm reduction and demand reduction strategies. The key intended outcome from such a trial will be minimising the harms associated with illicit drug use in our community, and saving lives.

## 6. Key readings

Barratt, MJ 2016, 'Drug safety testing with rapid feedback: next steps for Australia', paper presented to Drug and Alcohol Nurses of Australasia (DANA) Annual Conference 2016, <http://www.danaonline.org/publications/drug-safety-testing-with-rapid-feedback-next-steps-for-australia/> .

Brunt, TM, Nagy, C, Bucheli, A, Martins, D, Ugarte, M, Beduwe, C & Ventura Vilamala, M 2016, 'Drug testing in Europe: monitoring results of the Trans European Drug Information (TEDI) project', *Drug Test Anal*, online ahead of print.

Butterfield, RJ, Barratt, MJ, Ezard, N & Day, RO 2016, 'Perspective: drug checking to improve monitoring of new psychoactive substances in Australia', *Medical Journal of Australia*, vol. 204, no. 4, pp. 144-5.

Caldicott, D 2015, 'What is "drug checking" and why do we need it in Australia?', *The Conversation*, 1 December, <https://theconversation.com/what-is-drug-checking-and-why-do-we-need-it-in-australia-51578> .

Lancaster, K, Ritter, A & Matthew-Simmons, F 2013, *Young people's opinions on alcohol and other drugs issues*, Research Paper no. 27, Australian National Council on Drugs, Canberra.

Lefkovits, ZG 2016, *A public health and legislative consideration of methods to reduce drug-related harm in the Victorian party scene: on-site pill testing, market monitoring and publication of police drug seizure data. A pill too hard to swallow?*, Parliament of Victoria, Melbourne, <http://pilltestingsaveslives.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/77/2016/08/Pill-Testing-Report.pdf> .

Nicholas, R 2006, *On-site ecstasy pill testing - a consideration of the issues from a policing perspective*, Australasian Centre for Policing Research, [www.drugchecking.de/pdf/On-site%20ecstasy%20pill%20testing.pdf](http://www.drugchecking.de/pdf/On-site%20ecstasy%20pill%20testing.pdf) .

Ritter, A 2014, 'Six reasons Australia should pilot "pill testing" party drugs', *The Conversation*, 12 November, <https://theconversation.com/six-reasons-australia-should-pilot-pill-testing-party-drugs-34073> .

Stewart, R & Altamore, T 2016, 'Developing a pill testing program for music festivals', *ACT Population Health Bulletin*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 16-8.

Trans European Drug Information (TEDI) 2012, *Guidelines for drug checking methodology*, TEDI, n.p., <http://idpc.net/profile/Trans-european-drug-information> .

Tregoning, W 2016, *Drug checking brief*, Unharm, [http://www.unharm.org/drug\\_checking](http://www.unharm.org/drug_checking) .

## 7. Further information

For further information about this paper please contact Carrie Fowlie, CEO, Alcohol Tobacco and Other Drug Association ACT (ATODA) on (02) 6249 6358 or [carrie@atoda.org.au](mailto:carrie@atoda.org.au).

ATODA's vision is an ACT community with the lowest possible levels of alcohol, tobacco and other drug (ATOD) related harm, as a result of the ATOD and related sectors evidence-informed prevention, treatment and harm reduction policies and services.

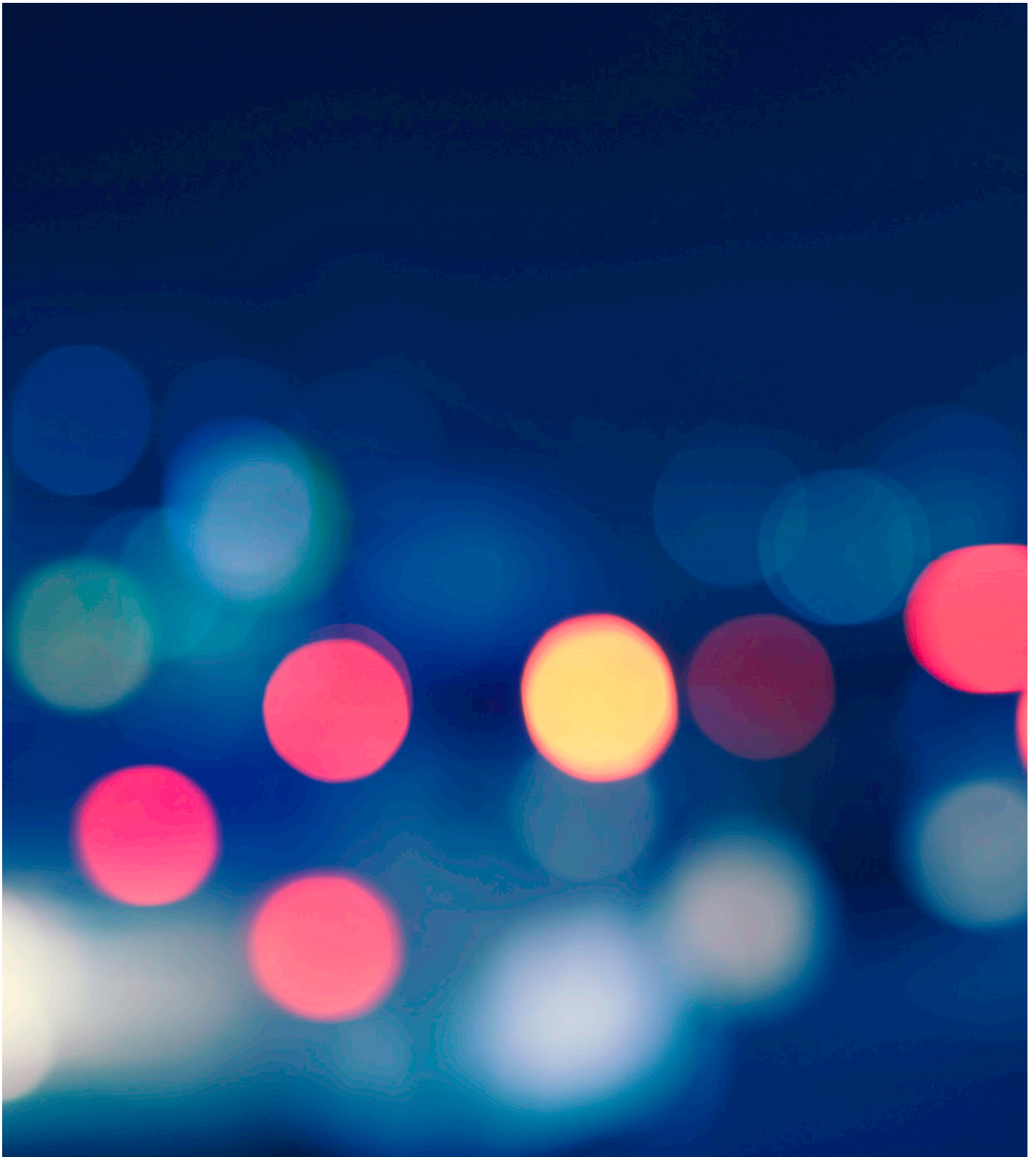
ATODA works collaboratively to provide expertise and leadership in the areas of social policy, sector and workforce development, research, coordination, partnerships, communication, education, information and resources. ATODA is an evidence informed organisation.

The ways we work, and the outcomes we strive to achieve, reflect our commitment to the values of population health, human rights, social justice and reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians.

The mission of ATODA is to be the peak body representing and supporting the ATOD sector and community in the ACT.

## Notes and sources cited

- 1 ATODA prefers the term 'drug checking' to 'pill testing'. This is because very few, if any, of the illicit drugs consumed in the ACT are in the form of pills. Most are herbal products, tablets, capsules, powders, impregnated paper, etc.
- 2 Lancaster, K, Ritter, A & Matthew-Simmons, F 2013, *Young people's opinions on alcohol and other drugs issues*, Research Paper no. 27, Australian National Council on Drugs, Canberra.
- 3 Stewart, R & Altamore, T 2016, 'Developing a pill testing program for music festivals', *ACT Population Health Bulletin*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 16-8.
- 4 Tregoning, W 2016, *Drug checking brief*, Unharm, [http://www.unharm.org/drug\\_checking](http://www.unharm.org/drug_checking) .
- 5 The Australian site referred to is at Canberra's Calvary Hospital, the ACTINOS (ACT Investigation of Novel Substances) project led by Associate Professor David Caldicott.
- 6 Barratt, MJ 2016, 'Drug safety testing with rapid feedback: next steps for Australia', paper presented to Drug and Alcohol Nurses of Australasia (DANA) Annual Conference 2016, <http://www.danaonline.org/publications/drug-safety-testing-with-rapid-feedback-next-steps-for-australia/>
- 7 Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission 2016, *Illicit drug data report 2014-15*, ACIC, Canberra.
- 8 Lenton, S, Dietze, P, Olsen, A, Wiggins, N, McDonald, D & Fowlie, C 2014, 'Working together: expanding the availability of naloxone for peer administration to prevent opioid overdose deaths in the Australian Capital Territory and beyond', *Drug and Alcohol Review*, vol. 34, no. 4, pp. 404-11.
- 9 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2014, *National Drug Strategy Household Survey detailed report 2013*, Drug Statistics Series no. 28, cat. no. PHE 183, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra.
- 10 Ritter, A 2014, 'Six reasons Australia should pilot "pill testing" party drugs', *The Conversation*, 12 November, <https://theconversation.com/six-reasons-australia-should-pilot-pill-testing-party-drugs-34073> .
- 11 <sup>1</sup>Canberra Times articles:
  - *Canberra police seize drugs as thousands flock to Spilt Milk music festival* (December 2016): <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/canberra-life/canberra-police-seize-drugs-as-thousands-flock-to-spilt-milk-music-festival-20161204-gt3hu2.html>
  - *Advocates call for pill testing at Spilt Milk music festival* (November 2016): <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/advocates-call-for-pill-testing-at-spilt-milk-music-festival-20161124-gsxbie.html>



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