



PILL TESTING SAVES LIVES

MINIMISING DRUG HARM THROUGH PILL TESTING, EARLY WARNING AND INFORMATION

The war on drugs has failed, and this is very clear when it comes to use of party drugs. People are still choosing to use drugs with no knowledge of what chemicals they contain, and record numbers are overdosing and dying as a result. It's time we introduced pill testing in Victoria.

Pill testing – also known as drug checking – can save lives. Earlier this year nine people were hospitalised in West Melbourne following a mass overdose at an event at Festival Hall.ⁱ Victorian deaths from MDMA (ecstasy) more than doubled between 2015 and 2016.ⁱⁱ Many of these overdoses – including deaths – could have been prevented if legal, reliable pill testing services were available in Victoria.

Despite some progressive recommendations contained in a Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Drug Law Reform in 2018, the Andrews Government has flatly refused to consider pill testing as an option. Senior law enforcement officials have spoken out in support of pill testing and the ACT Police supported a recent trial at the Groovin' the Moo festival. But Victoria Police won't support testing on the grounds that taking illicit drugs isn't safe and there's no legal framework to test.ⁱⁱⁱ

We know from evidence around the world that pill testing can increase knowledge and engagement with health professionals; result in people deciding not to take illicit drugs; and reduce levels of harmful substances contained in pills.^{iv} **In short, pill testing can save lives.** It's time Victoria stepped up to improve the safety of people who've already decided to take drugs, and to prevent the tragic deaths that will occur if we fail to take action.

The Greens have outlined a plan for a national approach to making pill testing services available in our communities. In the meantime, Victoria should be leading the way and immediately establishing these services that would pave the way for a national approach and reduce the risk of overdose and deaths.

The Victorian Greens will work with public health and drug policy experts to develop a two-year pill testing trial in Victoria. This would include mobile services^v for major events as well as fixed locations.

HOW PILL TESTING CAN SAVE LIVES

Pill testing is undertaken in more than 20 countries globally, with the majority of services located in Europe. Many have been operating for more than a decade; the Netherlands' testing service has been operating for 25 years.^{vi}

Pill testing can change behaviour, enable warnings about potentially deadly drugs to be communicated widely, reduce overdose frequency and get harmful products out of the black market.^{vii} It has strong local support where it exists in Europe, including from police as well as public health experts and service users.^{viii}

But one of the most important components of pill testing isn't actually the testing itself, it's the ability for drug users to engage with a medical professional. Research on pill testing in the UK found that nine out of ten service users have never discussed their drug use with a medical professional.^{ix} Brief interventions and the option of counselling and referrals are a critical harm reduction measure that would be central to the Greens' pill testing plan.



PILL TESTING SAVES LIVES

MINIMISING DRUG HARM THROUGH PILL TESTING, EARLY WARNING AND INFORMATION

HOW WOULD IT WORK IN VICTORIA?

Many services in Europe and the United States provide pill testing services in communities – not just at clubs and festivals. In cities such as Vienna, Madrid, and Zurich, citizens are able to anonymously drop off their pills at testing centres and then retrieve the results online hours later.

The Greens would develop a mixed-model approach to pill testing and put in place a two-year trial. This would include mobile testing services for people to access at major events as well as services at fixed locations. These locations could be stand-alone facilities or services collocated with existing health services.

All facilities would include consultation with service users, providing an opportunity for people intending to use drugs with access to a medical professional. All facilities would be linked with a real-time warning mechanism, enabling information about dangerous substances to be accessed by a wide group of potential users, as well as health and emergency services.

The trial would be supported by independent research, the results of which would be made public and would inform continuation and/or expansion of the program beyond the two-year trial.

The exact locations of services would be established through close consultation with public health experts, advocates and providers; venues and festival organisers; and organisations involved in the ACT pill testing trial.

CHRONIC INACTION FROM THE ANDREWS GOVERNMENT

In January this year, nine people were taken to hospital after suspected overdoses at the I Am Hardstyle event at Festival Hall in Melbourne. Several others made their own way to hospital. The mass overdose prompted calls for Premier Andrews to reconsider his opposition to drug checking but he has flatly refused.^x

A Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry undertook extensive research on drug law reform, including drug checking services internationally and relevance to Victoria. It's final recommendation on drug checking was to

'facilitate the availability of an onsite drug testing unit for health and law enforcement authorities at an appropriate music festival to be used in the event of a suspected overdose or other serious adverse effects due to an illicit substance'.^{xi} While the inquiry recognised the problem and a role for drug checking, it failed to propose the forward thinking and pragmatic solution that Victoria needs.

In the absence of any leadership from the Victorian Government, the Greens have already introduced legislation that would establish the framework for a pill testing trial. That bill – including the specifics of the model and widespread consultation – will be brought for debate in the next term of government.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The estimated cost of a two-year trial for Victoria would be \$3.5 million.^{xii} This includes full set-up and staffing of up to five services, including both fixed-site and mobile. Costs beyond the two-year trial would be dependent on results of the trial and recommendations.

ⁱ 'Nine in hospital after drug overdose at Festival Hall', ABC News website, 27 January 2018:

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-01-27/nine-in-hospital-after-drug-overdose-at-festival-hall/9366624>

ⁱⁱ Chloe Booker, 'Drug overdose deaths rise in Victoria', *The Age*, 28 March 2017:

<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/drug-overdose-deaths-rise-in-victoria-20170328-gv8f6k.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Victoria Police submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry on Drug Law Reform:

https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committee_s/lrrcsc/Drugs/_Submissions/231_2018.03.09_-_Victoria_Police_-_submission.pdf

^{iv} Andrew Groves, 'Worth the test? Pragmatism, pill testing and drug policy in Australia', *Harm Reduction Journal*, 15:12, 10 April 2018:

<https://harmreductionjournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12954-018-0216-z>

^v Front-of-house testing enables people using drugs to have their pills tested and it often provides the opportunity for users to engage with health professionals as part of the testing service. Back-of-house testing is for use only by police and emergency services.

^{vi} 'Global review of drug checking services operating in 2017', University of NSW, National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, Drug Policy Modelling Program, 2017:

<https://ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/ndarc/resources/Global%20review%20of%20drug%20checking%20services%20operating%20in%202017.pdf>

^{vii} Groves, *ibid*.



PILL TESTING SAVES LIVES

MINIMISING DRUG HARM THROUGH PILL TESTING, EARLY WARNING AND INFORMATION

- viii Kriener H, Schmid R. 'Check your pills. Check your life. ChEck iT! High quality on-site testing of illicit substances: information, counselling and safer use measures at raves in Austria', DrugText, 2005:
<https://www.pdf.investintech.com/preview/72856708-1d0a-11e8-b174-0cc47a792c0a/index.html>. Accessed 14 Jan 2017.
- ix Professor Fiona Meacham quoted in 'Pill testing examined in Victoria', ABC Radio, 27 January 2018:
<https://www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/am/pill-testing-examined-in-victoria/9366678>
- x Neelima Choahan and Rochelle Kirkham, 'No pill testing: Daniel Andrews stays firm on state policy', *The Age*, 28 January 2018:
<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/no-pill-testing-daniel-andrews-stays-firm-on-state-policy-20180128-p4yyyp.html>
- xi 'Inquiry into drug law reform: final report', Parliament of Victoria Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee, March 2018:
https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/file_uploads/LRRCSC_58-03_Full_Report_Text_WEB_XQB31XDL.pdf
- xii The Greens' plan for pill testing has been fully costed by the Australian Parliamentary Budget Office.