



LET'S GET REAL ABOUT DRUGS

Just test it: pill testing saves lives

Community based pill testing to reduce harm

We need to get real about pills. The war on drugs has failed, with almost five percent of adults having used ecstasy or cocaine in the last year. Every year, young Australians tragically lose their lives after taking dangerous pills, and so it's time to create facilities that allow pills to be tested and the results communicated to the people who may choose to take them. The Australian Greens would implement drug testing in the community to save lives, by ensuring that people who use pills understand what they are taking and make more informed choices about their drug use.

> DANGEROUS PILLS CAUSE ENORMOUS HARM

Over 10% of the population have used ecstasy and 9% have used cocaine at least once in their lives. In the past 12 months, 2.2% of Australians have used ecstasy and 2.5% have used cocaine. These statistics show that, despite these drugs being illegal, Australians still choose to use them. The reality of this choice is that millions of Australians - primarily young people - are buying pills with little to no information about what is in them or what their pills will do to them.

Interviews with people who regularly use ecstasy and related drugs show that, aside from death, people experience a range of other harms including: non-fatal stimulant overdose and non-fatal depressant overdose¹.

Countries all around the world, including the Netherlands, Portugal and Austria, are realising that, when people are exposed to dangerous pills without complementary approaches aimed at reducing harm (such as pill testing), they are putting themselves at risk of death, non-fatal stimulant overdose and non-fatal depressant overdose. Where pill testing has been trialled and implemented overseas, in the community or at festivals, it helps reduce the harms caused by pills by:

- Helping people understand what they are taking
- Connecting people who would otherwise be unlikely to use health services with services at which they can discuss their drug use or health issues
- Linking people in with health services that are non-judgemental and are able to talk about their drug use
- Giving critical information to health professionals about what pills and other drugs people in the community have been taking
- Create an early warning system beyond the informal networks of individual pill users and local communities which currently exist

Local evidence offers further support that pill testing saves lives. When a similar service was conducted at the *Groovin' the Moo* music festival in 2018, 40% of people who had pills tested indicated that they would either not use illicit drugs at all or would use less illicit drugs². Similar figures have also been seen when pills have been tested in the UK, with about 20% of users reporting that they would bin their pills after they found out the results of the test³.

Testing pills also breaks up the business model of drug dealers, by identifying and warning people against buying potentially lethal drug products. Over time, similar services to what we are proposing overseas have been shown to lead to pills with less dangerous additives in the market⁴.

¹ Peacock, A., Gibbs, D., Karlsson, A., Uporova, J., Sutherland, R., Bruno, R., Dietze, P., Lenton, S., Alati, R., Degenhardt, L., & Farrell, M. (2018). Australian Drug Trends 2018. Key findings from the National Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS) Interviews. Sydney, National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Australia.

² Makkai, T., Macleod, M., Vumbaca, G., Hill, P., Caldicott, D., Noffs, M., Tzanetis, S., Hansen, F., 2018, Report on Canberra GTM Harm Reduction Service, Harm Reduction Australia.

³ <https://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/how-pill-testing-works-in-the-united-kingdom/9146380>

⁴ Spruit, I. P (2001) Monitoring Synthetic Drug Markets, Trends, and Public Health *Substance use and misuse* (1-2)

> MAKING PILL TESTING ACCESSIBLE THROUGH COMMUNITY BASED SERVICES

The Australian Greens will establish pill testing services in communities all over the country, which are available at times and locations relevant to the people using them. These pill testing services will:

- Operate for the benefit of people who consume pills, not police and law enforcement.
- Offer people a one-on-one consultation with a trained drug and alcohol counsellor about the content of the pills they present. Counsellors will not tell a person if they should take the drug, only advise them about the results of the test and tell them about health services that exist in their area.
- Use world leading testing methodology (which is currently infrared spectroscopy (IR)) to test pills. These tests will: identify the types of substances in a pill, attempt to match the contents of the pill against other existing pills that have been tested in Australia and internationally, and identify how much of each substance there is in the pill.
- Open outside of business hours, at specific times relevant to the community that they serve. The specific conditions under which each service operates will be determined in consultation with the Drug Testing Agency (see further detail below).
- Be free for users to access.

These units will be health services where people can access easy to understand, accurate and up to date information about drugs- either standalone or co-located with other health services as appropriate for the community they serve. In the first year of the policy we will establish six services, and expand this to 18 over the next four years. Specific locations will be determined by the Drug Testing Agency in consultation with States and Territories.

> FUNDING RESEARCH TO KEEP AUSTRALIA AT THE FRONT LINE OF OPERATIONS

In conjunction with establishing the services, we will fund ongoing research and evaluation of the program to ensure that the results that are given to Australian consumers are the best quality they can be, and that the clinicians who are doing this work are as up to date as they can be.

> AN EARLY WARNING SYSTEM TO INFORM PEOPLE WHAT'S IN THE PILL SUPPLY CHAIN

Under our plan to introduce pill testing and save lives, information about pills which have been tested will be disseminated through social media and hospital emergency departments.

A similar model exists in the Netherlands – the Drug Information Monitoring System (DIMS). DIMS, and our system, will help ensure that the results of testing are distributed to other people who are considering taking pills, but are yet to take them. This system will extend the impact and reach of the individual consultations to the broader community, while maintaining the privacy of people who have had their pills tested.

> THE AUSTRALIAN DRUG TESTING AGENCY

To oversee and steward these initiatives, the Australian Greens would establish a national Drug Testing Agency which draws together state and territory governments, clinicians and users. The Agency would evaluate the drug testing program, coordinate research in the area and work with law enforcement professionals to ensure that the program continues to be acceptable to all parties.

> HOW MUCH WILL THIS COST?

Establishing and maintaining the services, the early warning system and the Agency will cost \$16 million over four years. This cost has been independently established and verified by the Parliamentary Budget Office. We will fund research through the broader Australian Greens commitment to increase research funding to appropriate national levels.