

Jeremy Hanson... calling to stop the pill testing.

However, experience from the UK, a recent inquiry in Victoria and advice from medical and legal experts, has led me to conclude that pill testing is not the right way to deal with the complex issue of illicit drug use.

Drugs like MDMA are potentially lethal regardless of what they are mixed with, and the real risk is that government-sanctioned pill testing will send the false and dangerous message that illicit drugs are safe.

The president of the Australian Medical Association made this point saying: "The last thing we would want to do is give people a false sense of security about taking illegal drugs cooked up in someone's bath tub."

His view is supported by toxicologist Andrew Leibie, from Safework Laboratories, who says: "Public statements made by politicians that the trial would help 'keep people safe' were potentially misleading. MDMA is not a safe drug."

The State Health Commander of Ambulance Victoria recently said about drug testing: "It's a poison. You can test a poison all you like, it remains a poison."

ABC Central Victoria recently conducted a survey at a music festival in Bendigo and found young festival goers were indeed of the false belief that pill testing would make drugs safe, with one saying that: "The fact they can test it and make sure that they are going to be safe is definitely a good thing."

Another young festival goer said: "It could make you want to take more drugs. It would definitely give you peace of mind."

As the "Internal Medicine Journal" said in November, 2016: "Pill testing gives at best an artificial 'shine of safety'."

Again, I quote toxicologist Andrew Leibie, who said: "The whole concept is based on the false assumption that if you do know what you're taking, it is safe – something that is absolutely untrue."

One of the most compelling pieces of evidence is that in the UK, which has introduced pill testing, the death toll from illicit drugs actually increased after pill testing started.

According to figures released by the Office of National Statistics in Britain towards the end of 2016, deaths linked to ecstasy or MDMA are at their highest level in a decade. The tragic reality is that England suffered record high drug deaths last year.

Opposition to pill testing in Australia is widespread and bipartisan and is opposed for good reason by all state and territory governments other than the ACT Labor government.

Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews recently repeated his opposition by making the point that “these drugs cannot be consumed at a safe level, therefore, we will not be putting in place a pill-testing regime. Not under a government I lead”.

A recent 680-page bipartisan report into drug law reform from a parliamentary inquiry in Victoria rejected pill testing as proposed in Canberra and warned: “A key concern of the committee regarding drug checking is that it may lead to a perception among individuals who use drugs that, once the substances are tested, they are safe to consume...’

Further, the report found that “a related concern is that drug-checking services might be misused by drug suppliers, by using information provided by drug-checking services to promote ‘the safety’ of their product”.

The use of illicit drugs is a complex issue and the Canberra Liberals remain open to evidence-based measures to reduce harm. However, having considered all of the evidence and advice, I believe that pill testing will most likely do more harm than good, and further trials in the ACT should not be supported.

*Jeremy Hanson is a Liberal MLA and Shadow Attorney-General.*