

Drug Free Australia's series - exposing pill testing misinformation

Episode 3 – More deaths the result

Their narrative

- Their repeated claim in the media:

“Since 2002, several studies have clearly shown pill testing has never been associated with increased drug use, or drug-related harm – no matter how much opponents of pill testing would have you believe.”

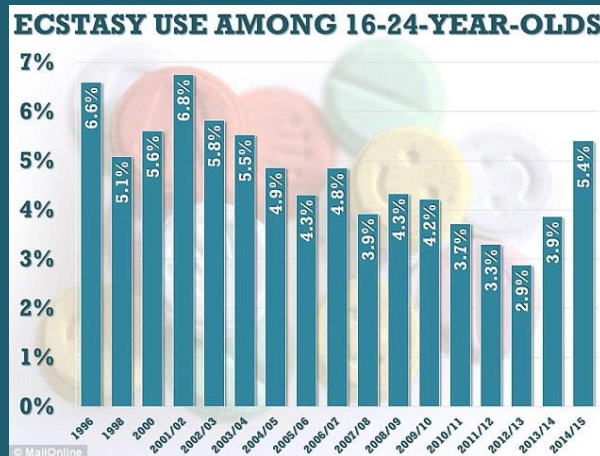


The screenshot shows a news article from 'THE CONVERSATION' website. The article is titled 'Pill testing really does reduce the risk of harm for drug users' and was published on April 27, 2022, at 10:19am AEST. The article features a photograph of a crowd at a music festival with many people holding up their phones to take pictures. The text of the article discusses the withdrawal of a free drug checking service at the Groovin the Moo festival in Canberra and provides a history of pill testing in Australia. A 'Get newsletter' button is visible at the bottom of the article preview.

<https://theconversation.com/pill-testing-really-does-reduce-the-risk-of-harm-for-drug-users-181778>

Pretend science

- Study cited by the Conversation – see slide 2
“On average, the weekly consumption of the evaluated sample population (**between 2004 and 2009**) increased for alcohol, cannabis and cocaine and decreased for ecstasy and amphetamines.”
- Study fails to look at trends for all ecstasy users



Claims of decreased ecstasy use amongst users who are using pill testing services must be verified against all other ecstasy users in the same population, where general decreases in use overall would nullify the study's conclusion – for example, the UK's ecstasy use was decreasing at the same time as the European study here as per this graph

Harm Reduction Journal | BMC

Harm Reduct J, 2011; 8: 16.
Published online 2011 Jun 10. doi: [10.1186/1477-7517-8-16](https://doi.org/10.1186/1477-7517-8-16)

PMCID: PMC3123557
PMID: 21663618

Drug Checking: A prevention measure for a heterogeneous group with high consumption frequency and polydrug use - evaluation of zürich's drug checking services

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Abstract Go to: [▶](#)

Background

The increasing party culture in Zurich presents new challenges, especially regarding the consumption of alcohol and so-called party drugs. Streetwork, the youth advisory service of the city of Zurich, has provided onsite and stationary Drug Checking facilities since 2001 and 2006, respectively. Drug Checking always involves filling out an anonymous questionnaire, which allows the collection of important information about a largely unknown group of users and their consumption patterns.

Methods

The questionnaires assessed sociodemographic characteristics, consumption patterns, Drug Checking experiences, information behavior and social support. The collected data were statistically analyzed by the Research Institute for Public Health and Addiction (RIPHA).

Results

The majority of Drug Checking service patrons were male and between 20 and 35 years old. These patrons reported high lifetime prevalences and high consumption frequencies of legal and illegal substances, and they often reported polydrug use. Aside from tobacco and alcohol, the most consumed drugs during typical party nights were ecstasy, amphetamines, cannabis and cocaine. Party drug consumers using Drug Checking services form a heterogeneous group with respect to sociodemographic characteristics and consumption patterns. Users of the onsite Drug Checking facilities were significantly younger, were less experienced with drug testing, and reported more polydrug use than users of the stationary Drug Checking service.

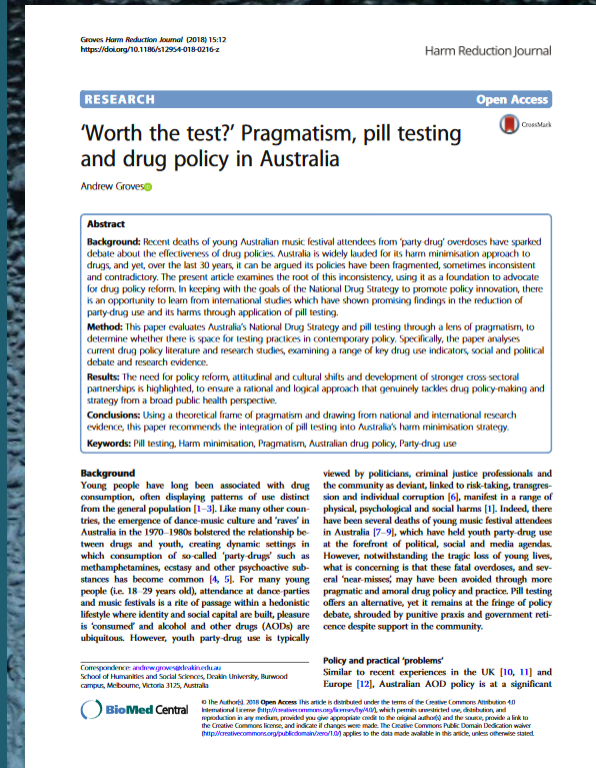
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3123557/>
<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3172049/Young-people-taking-ecstasy-hits-11-year-high-cannabis-cocaine-use-rises.html>

Pretend Science

- 2018 Australian review of the Science
 - admits - no rigorous studies to evaluate pill testing

“Like most debates about policy reform, a key question in the rationale for pill testing is whether it ‘works’. The literature is complicated and, to date, **no studies have fully tested in a controlled way, whether pill testing reduces harms.**” – p 7

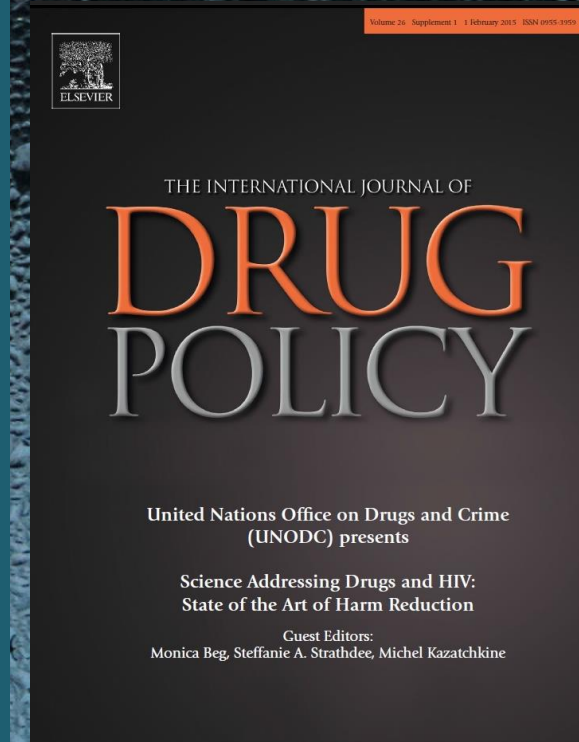
“Most evaluations concern attitudinal change (e.g. what people *would do* [20]), legal issues and the integrity of various analytic procedures, with others describing program features or contextually relevant praxis [76], so although not within the scope of this paper, **a large, multi-site systematic review of testing practices is needed.**” – p 7



<https://web.archive.org/web/20200306094713/https://dro.deakin.edu.au/eserv/DU:30107675/groves-worththetest-2018.pdf>

The Science

- Two scientific analyses of coroners' reports on ecstasy (MDMA) pill deaths in Australia
 - The first is a subset of the second larger study with . . .
 - 392 ecstasy deaths between 2000 and 2018
 - no deaths from impurities identified
 - 5% of deaths had another drug mixed in the pill
 - this indicates that ecstasy is causal in 95% of deaths
 - 'bad batch' deaths almost non-existent in Australia
 - only 3 Chapel Street Melbourne deaths (2017)
 - so it is likely, on the probabilities of ecstasy causing the other 95% of deaths, that 99% are caused by it



<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31865118/>

Their practise

- From Pill Testing Australia's evaluation – p 11
 - After testing a pill is given a white, yellow or red card
 - An ecstasy pill containing no other drug is white-carded
 - Yet it is ecstasy that kills most Australians

Diagram 3: Classification and reporting of detected substances

WHITE:	Where a substance was analysed, and was the same as what the patron anticipated that it might be
YELLOW:	Where a substance was analysed, and there was a significant disparity between the result and what the patron anticipated that it was
RED:	Where a substance was analysed, and revealed the presence of a substance known to be associated with increased harm / multiple overdoses/ death Where a substance was analysed and returned an ambivalent result, or functional groups known to be associated with significant harm

- Conclusion: There is no defensible rationale for pill testing

Report on the ACT GTM Pill Testing Pilot: a Harm Reduction Service

Prepared by the Safety Testing Advisory Service
At Festivals and Events (STA-SAFE) Consortium

June, 2018

The STA-SAFE consortium consists of:

Harm Reduction Australia
Australian Drug Observatory, Australian National University
Noffs Foundation
DanceWize, Harm Reduction Victoria
Students for Sensible Drug Policy Australia



2019 evaluation

- In 2019 the Australian National University evaluated a pill testing trial in Canberra (still relying on self-report)

“ . . . those who received a test result confirming the substance to be what they thought it was **were likely to take as much or more than originally intended.**” – p 33

“ . . . concordance between expectation and identification is associated with **stable or increased intention to take a substance.**” – p34

- **about 90% of pills tested were Ecstasy pills – p 18**



ACT Pill Testing Trial 2019: Program evaluation

Anna Olsen
Gabriel Wong
David McDonald

Summary

- MDMA is the substance causing **almost all party pill deaths in Australia**
- If Pill Testing Australia detects only MDMA in a pill, **it greenlights the pill** with a **white card**
- Once users have confirmed that their Ecstasy pill contains no other drug than MDMA, they are **more likely** to consume the pill

Conclusion

- **Pill testing is leading to increased use of the fatality-causing drug MDMA**

Summary

More deaths the result

Next episode

- In this series

1. It's the ecstasy, stupid!!
2. How ecstasy causes death
3. More deaths the result
4. **The UK's bad experience**
5. Better equipment useless
6. Call out your politicians