



17 January 2019

Open Letter to State Premiers and Chief Ministers

Dear Premier/Chief Minister

**There is sufficient evidence to support pill testing trials at festivals**

Last weekend, another young woman died after taking drugs at a music festival in Sydney. In light of the six deaths at festivals in Australia since last September, we urge you to follow the lead of the ACT Government in consulting with medical experts to establish pill testing trials in your State or Territory.

The Royal Australasian College of Physicians connects, trains and educates over 25,000 medical specialists and trainee specialists from 33 different specialties across Australia and New Zealand. Our members have valuable expert knowledge and first-hand experience on this matter and include addiction medicine physicians and public health physicians. Our mission is to serve the health of all patients and broader communities where our members practice. This is accomplished through a focus on the provision of evidence-based best practice in all areas of medicine.

Ideally, we would all like young people and the wider public not to use drugs illicitly, however; the reality is that they do in large numbers<sup>1</sup> and the moral message to abstain from taking drugs is not getting through. In addition, the evidence to date shows that existing policies in place at festivals to discourage drug taking, including heavy police presence, sniffer dogs and searches, are not effective. An over-emphasis on law enforcement is failing our communities and our young people, leading to unnecessary deaths.

Pill testing has been adopted by several European countries including the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Austria, Belgium, Switzerland and Germany. The RACP's experts in addiction medicine and public health medicine believe the evidence currently available<sup>2</sup> justifies the introduction of carefully designed pill testing trials in Australia. Pill testing within these trials should be conducted in purpose-designed facilities by appropriately qualified technical specialists and should be accompanied by appropriate advice and information to allow festival goers to make informed choices.

Importantly, the RACP does not support the provision of do-it-yourself pill testing kits which may make unsubstantiated claims about their ability to detect harmful substances. However, as more festival goers become aware of the potential to carry out their own pill tests, there is a risk that do-it-yourself pill testing kits may become the default option unless dedicated facilities are available.

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<sup>1</sup> Note: Over a quarter of people aged 20 to 29 reported having illicitly used drugs in 2016. Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2017. *National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2016: detailed findings. Drug Statistics series no. 31. Cat. no. PHE 214. Canberra: AIHW. p.56*

<sup>2</sup> For a summary of recent evidence, please refer to Prof. Alison Ritter's article, *Opinion – Evidence clearly shows benefits of pill testing*, 10 January 2019. Available online: <https://newsroom.unsw.edu.au/news/health/evidence-clearly-shows-benefits-pill-testing>

Pill testing is by no means a panacea; it needs to be implemented in conjunction with other evidence-based harm minimisation measures that prioritise the health and safety of festival goers over criminal and legal measures. It is important to acknowledge that pill testing technology has limitations, including that it currently cannot provide precise information on how much of any substance a pill contains. Nevertheless, pill testing facilities at festivals can identify lethal ingredients. These facilities also offer an opportunity for medical professionals to provide trusted face-to-face advice to young people about the risks of drug taking. The advice provided does not claim any substances to be 'safe' and does not condone drug taking, it simply enables those who get their pills tested to make better informed decisions.

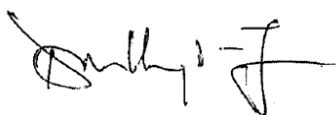
As stated in the 2018 Report on the ACT GTM Pill Testing Pilot<sup>3</sup>, the three aims of pill testing are to save lives by:

- *“Providing the opportunity for people to be informed and consider a range of options before determining whether or not to consume an illicit drug.*
- *Reducing the number of people potentially requiring an ambulance call out, as well as attending hospitals, police holding cells and courts as a result of consuming unknown drugs – which in turn delivers a range of individual, family and community based positive outcomes; and*
- *Obtaining a range of street samples for detailed testing that allows for community health warnings on new compounds and assists law enforcement intelligence on illegal drug manufacturing and importations in Australia.”*

The ACT Government has led the way by undertaking a pill testing pilot. We urge other State and Territory governments to listen to the medical community and support pill testing trials. The RACP, Australian Medical Association (AMA), the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) and individual experts<sup>4</sup> are united in calling for pill testing trials to be implemented.

We call on your Government to consult with addiction medicine physicians, public health medicine physicians, clinical pharmacologists and toxicologists and other relevant experts to develop pill testing trials that are carefully designed and evaluated to inform drug policy and minimise harms to young people and the broader community.

Yours sincerely



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<sup>3</sup> 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, p.3

<sup>4</sup> Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones (President of the RACP Australasian Chapter of Addiction Medicine) and Prof. Paul Komesaroff (RACP Board member and President of the RACP Adult Medicine Division), *Here's why doctors are backing pill testing at music festivals across Australia*. The Conversation, 8 January 2019. Available online: <https://theconversation.com/heres-why-doctors-are-backing-pill-testing-at-music-festivals-across-australia-109430>