

Emerging aspects of Australian fixed site drug checking - CanTEST results, challenges, innovative approaches and future perspectives

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Aim:

This symposium builds upon the results, challenges and innovative approaches that have been developed during the implementation of the CanTEST fixed site drug checking Service and seeks to answer questions regarding the future of drug checking in Australia. CanTEST is a partnership of several different, complementary organisations who each bring diverse approaches and different expertise to the service. This symposium will explore some of the innovative approaches utilised by CanTEST partners. The aim of this symposium is to showcase some of these approaches and to inform and add to ongoing conversations happening across Australia around how do you implement drug checking services and ensure that information is accessible and available to people who use drugs. As Australia looks to the future of drug checking, perspectives from service delivery will help shape the next quarter century of drug checking policy.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

PRESENTATION 1: Drug checking as monitor of local drug markets

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Background: Understanding drug market dynamics is essential in developing effective measures to reduce drug-related harms. Recently in Australia, the ACT and Queensland have deployed drug checking, also called pill testing, to monitor drug markets. Drug checking links client expectation with analytical findings directly and provides a powerful approach to identify drug purity trends, drug adulteration and the emergence of new substances in real time.

Description of Model of Care/Intervention: In July 2022, the CanTEST Health and Drug Checking Service opened in central Canberra, Australia. The service provides free and confidential chemical analysis of samples provided by the public, accompanied by harm reduction and health interventions. Analytical and other data arising from the service are used to provide public information and education, including community notifications and public health alerts for substances of concern. Over time, aggregate data reveals changes to the local drug market.

Effectiveness/Acceptability/Implementation: Data generated from the first two years of service operation provides information on the dynamic nature of the local drug market. Trends for major drug classes include dramatic changes to the purity and adulteration of cocaine, and the common substitution of ketamine for a range of unexpected new psychoactive substances (NPS). The data also provides unprecedented insight into NPS present in the Australian drug market, including compounds described for the first time, both in Australia, and internationally.

Conclusion and Next Steps: Drug checking provides an effective mechanism to monitor drug markets. However, limitations exist in the drug classes that can be monitored, and the geographic regions and drug user populations that can be reached by current service offerings. Technological innovation provides avenues to expand the capacity of drug checking more comprehensively monitor local drug markets.

Implications for Practice or Policy (optional): Drug checking provides valuable information on drug market dynamics. Greater integration of drug checking data with other monitoring systems would provide information on drug market changes and early warning of drug related harms.

Disclosure of Interest Statement: BH and Directions Health Services (DHS) holds the ACT Government contract to deliver the CanTEST service. MDM receives funding from DHS for the analysis of drug samples.

PRESENTATION 2: Complementing Mobile and Fixed Site Drug Checking Services During Major Festivals

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Background: Fixed-site CanTEST health and drug checking service experiences surges in demand coinciding with major festivals in the ACT and large-scale events in regional NSW and Victoria. 2022-24 service data highlights the critical role of both fixed and mobile drug checking services to provide tailored interventions with clients and in managing public health messaging during mass gatherings.

Description of Model of Care/Intervention: Since July 2022 the CanTEST fixed site has bolstered its service offerings around large-scale events, including to complement mobile drug checking onsite at a major festival. This dual approach allows for continuity in service, providing festivalgoers and the general public access to drug checking services, and the public health benefit of contemporary community notices. When onsite drug checking is unavailable, peer-based harm reduction services at festivals can still amplify crowd awareness of drug testing trends.

Effectiveness/Acceptability/Implementation: The integration of fixed and mobile CanTEST services allows access to a diverse and greater number of clients. This model not only managed the immediate needs during the festival but also maintained service availability before and after the event, and provided 2 data sources to compare, enhancing overall public safety and drug awareness.

Conclusion and Next Steps: The synergy between fixed and mobile CanTEST services has proven effective in addressing service surges during festivals. Expanding this model could further mitigate health risks associated with drug use at public events.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Rather than advocating for fixed or mobile drug checking services, having both is complementary and optimises service delivery. While information-sharing between different jurisdictions and organisations has its practical challenges, the public health benefit of ensuring all drug checking data is triangulated should be a policy priority.

PRESENTATION 3: Community and Chemistry: Uncovering Real-Time Information on Emerging Novel Psychoactive Compounds

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Background: Novel psychoactive substances (NPS) present a challenge in harm reduction due to adulteration, substitution and a lack of established knowledge. Historically, insights relied on community reports and online resources like Test4Pay, drugsdata.org, pillreports, and bluelight forums. The advent of fixed site and festival drug testing has established a new approach, where community and chemists work together to identify and understand emerging NPS. This synergy was crucial in detecting and reducing harm from novel cathinones at CanTEST by combining community anecdotes with analytical data.

Model of Care/Intervention: At CanTEST and various community outreach events, including festivals, CAHMA peer educators engage with community members to provide harm reduction services. As peers, CAHMA workers receive information about drug trends by directly and non-judgmentally engaging with the community. Aligning this insight with detailed chemical analysis allows them to communicate relevant signals to early warning systems and public health stakeholders, increasing awareness of potential risks. CAHMA's peer educators also gather valuable information on the subjective effects of specific NPS, forming the basis of harm reduction guides.

Effectiveness/Acceptability/Implementation: Incorporating community insights, firsthand experiences, and chemical analysis into public health responses has proven effective. CAHMA has deployed extensive harm reduction articles on NPS found at CanTEST, available on the CAHMA website. These articles have reached over 100,000 people globally, reflecting strong community engagement.

Conclusion and Next Steps: The NPS articles inform peer educators and empower them to influence public health strategies and educational outreach. Plans to introduce more comprehensive training for peers and extend the communication network among people who use drugs, chemists, health professionals, and researchers will ensure harm reduction information remains current and effective. This community-centric approach will continue to serve as a model for developing responsive and informed public health interventions.

PRESENTATION 4: The Diffusion of Innovation and Trojan Mice - What the next 25 years of Drug Checking in Australia might look like.

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Background: Since the local introduction of drug checking services in Australia, the rapidity of fluctuation within Australian drug markets has become more evident. That which has been introduced is currently fit for purpose, but will it remain that way for the next quarter of a century? The drugs, the consumers and the political space in which such services can operate will define the nature of their provision in the next 25 years.

Description of Model of Care/Intervention: The first government sanctioned trial of drug checking or 'pill testing', occurred in 2018 in the ACT, laying the groundwork for opening The CanTEST Health and Drug Checking Service. Since then, other jurisdictions such as QLD have introduced their own services. There is a tradition of innovation within the service that has been responsible for much of its success, and that tradition is one that will need to be deployed to remain relevant & to face the challenges that face such services in the next decades.

Effectiveness/Acceptability/Implementation: Having reviewed the trends in both consumers and drug products using CanTEST data set, it becomes possible to speculate upon the directions in which drug checking might take in Australia in the next quarter century. A Trojan Mouse approach may become possible, as greater numbers of jurisdictions and providers become involved in-service provision, significantly amplifying the rates at which progress in our understanding of markets and the nature of consumers and products can evolve.

Conclusion and Next Steps: The innovation that has been possible in the ACT has been, in part, due to the small size of the jurisdiction, and the ease with which service providers can nimbly pivot on the issues. The future of such services requires approaches specific to future local needs, while being informed by global trends of use & service provision.

Implications for Practice or Policy (optional): The drugs market is a rapidly evolving entity and deserves responses & services that can keep pace with it. It is incumbent upon those that provide such services to not merely stay abreast of that which is happening currently, but to risk being wrong in anticipating that which will be necessary in the decades to come.

Discussion Section: As drug checking begins to roll out across Australia and we look to the future, the insights from the CanTEST fixed-site service serve as a cornerstone for our discussion. The presentations today have highlighted key areas: monitoring local drug markets, the synergy between fixed and mobile drug checking services during festivals, and the crucial role of community engagement in identifying and addressing novel psychoactive substances (NPS). Looking ahead, the future of drug checking will likely involve expanding these innovative approaches. Enhanced integration of real-time data, technological advancements in drug analysis, and stronger collaborations between service providers and community organisations will be essential. This discussion aims to explore how we can build on the successes of CanTEST, address emerging challenges, and shape a responsive and effective drug checking framework that ensures the safety and well-being of people who use drugs across Australia. We invite the audience to share their perspectives, ask questions, and contribute to envisioning the next steps for drug checking services in our country.

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