

A collaborative approach to reducing the harms from adulterated substances in NSW: NUAA and the Standing Panel on Toxicity Risk

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Background: The NSW Ministry of Health initiated the Standing Panel on Toxicity Risk (SPaToR) in 2020 with NUAA as a participant. Incidents of drug related harm that involve adulterated, substituted or especially potent substances are referred to SPaToR. We report how this collaboration between clinicians, public health experts and peers enhances safety in NSW.

Description of Model of Care/Intervention: Incidents of drug related harm that involve adulterated, substituted or especially potent substances are referred to SPaToR. A group of clinicians and public health experts, along with NUAA, assess each risk and determine the response. NUAA has input into the official alert as well as producing community-focussed social media.

Effectiveness/Acceptability/Implementation: Alerts range from potent MDMA to cocaine adulterated with fentanyl. A recent case concerned with multiple overdoses seen across Australia resulting from the consumption of non-food grade poppy seeds high in thebaine made into "tea" illustrates the complexities surrounding this work, and how this committee collaborated to reduce harm by issuing the first public alert in Australia.

The intended audience for the "poppy seed tea" alert was unknown and not thought to be people tied into typical communication channels for drug alerts. In contrast to typical matters considered by SPaToR, information available to NSW Health was limited as cases were occurring nationwide. These limitations resulted in a general alert that worked to rapidly inform the broader public of possible harms both in NSW and across Australia with other jurisdictions subsequently following suit.

Conclusion and Next Steps: Interagency collaboration, particularly with peer input, enhances public health responses to signals of drug harm. Open communication with all stakeholders was a key factor in preventing further harms from poppy seed tea.

Implications for practice: Nuanced, evidence-based, plain English messaging is crucial in creating far-reaching and effective messages. The close collaboration between clinicians, public health experts and peers ensures the most effective response.

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