DRUG SAFETY TESTING: HOW DO WE MEASURE SUCCESS?

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Introduction / Issues: Drug safety testing, drug testing or pill checking has operated for fifty years and is currently receiving increased attention due to technological and pharmacological innovations, yet critics note that evaluations are sparse and academic research is minimal. Fiona will consider the current evidence base and present the first findings from the introduction of drug safety testing to the UK in 2016 and rollout in 2017.

Method / Approach: After 2016 piloting, in 2017 over 2,000 samples were submitted for forensic testing to a free, confidential drug safety testing service at three UK festivals, known as Multi Agency Safety Testing. Test results were returned directly to service users about an hour later as part of a brief intervention delivered by a trained healthcare professional, to over 4,000 festival-goers ranging in age from 15-70, and to all onsite emergency services. Testing and brief intervention data were recorded and analysed using SPSS. Other data were collected during fieldwork through interview, observation and secondary documentary analysis.

Key Findings: First findings are presented here for summer 2017 festivals regarding 3 key groups of indicators: individual behavioural outcomes (including disposals); onsite drug-related harm (including hospitalisations); and off site broader social outcomes (including trend monitoring).

Discussions and Conclusions: Given the variable and unknown contents of the illegal drug market, drug safety testing can significantly reduce drug-related harm at leisure events and more widely in a number of ways. Importantly it is the only way to connect what users think they obtained with the actual contents of their drugs.

Implications for Policy: If drug safety testing has value as a harm reduction service, how does this intersect with the wider drug policy context? What changes are necessary to roll out drug safety testing across user groups, what obstacles are there to such services and what is the wider policy significance?