Drug checking: A community-centred drug market monitoring program

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Within the context of drug prohibition, unregulated drugs are supplied without any assurance of quality or consistency. Adulteration and substitution are serious health risks for people who these drugs, which often have unknown composition and variable potency, resulting in fatal and non-fatal overdose. The adulteration of drugs with new psychoactive substances (NPS) disguised as more familiar substances is common, with the types of NPS changing regularly, further compounding the risks. Drug checking services (DCS) provide an actionable harm-reduction service with rapid drug market monitoring to mitigate the toxic drug supply. People who use drugs donate samples for chemical analysis, with results provided to the service user alongside tailored harm-reduction conversations. Australia has operated DCS in four jurisdictions (ACT, Qld, Vic, NSW) but is only operating in ACT and Vic at time of writing. Globally, DCS operate in over 30 countries and have exploded in North America recently in response to their opioid overdose crisis. Drug-using communities use DCS in varied contexts, with service models including event-based, fixed-site, postal/mail-in, co-location with needle and syringe programs / safer consumption sites, and outreach services (e.g. vans). The inherent power of DCS is providing immediate information back to service users, while simultaneously generating near real-time data for policy and prevention. By inverting traditional surveillance paradigms, most directly impacted individuals receive results first, thereby changing dissemination strategies from aggregation and trend analysis.

We will provide an overview of the current science and progress of DCS, including:

- Setting the scene - current landscape of unregulated drug markets and early warning systems in Australia
- Enter drug checking services - what they do, different service delivery models, current evidence for effectiveness, examples of impact, countering myths
- International perspective - how DCS operate as a mail-in service for the whole USA, stories and examples of impact among community members

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