

How drug checking is implemented matters – knowledge exchange from an established project

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Introduction: Drug checking is increasingly pursued as a harm reduction response to substance use including the risks of overdose. Substance Drug Checking is an established service and program of research on the unceded Indigenous territories of Vancouver Island, Canada. This interdisciplinary project, guided by principles of harm reduction and health equity, provides a unique knowledge exchange opportunity for Australasian and international policy, practice and research communities pursuing drug checking.

Methods: A consolidation of several qualitative research studies with prospective service users guided by an implementation science framework creates an evidence-base for an equity-oriented approach for drug checking that reaches rural, urban and Indigenous communities. The current distributed model of drug checking now generates service data as further practice-based evidence to advance practice and policy.

Key Findings: Implementing community drug checking faces significant challenges including access, equity, costs, timeliness, relevance as well as criminalization and stigmatization. A distributed model of drug checking is implemented to address barriers raised by potential service users. Health equity strategies are critical to implementation, such as employing contextually tailored approaches to better reach diverse populations. This supports drug checking as a population level intervention, with implementation tailored to the social gradient in substance use.

Discussions and Conclusions: How drug checking is implemented matters. Effective outcomes are dependent on addressing barriers through new technologies and unique service models tailored to diverse needs to ensure scale and reach. A socioecological model for drug checking is developed as a guiding framework that goes beyond the focus on individual behavioural changes.

Implications on communities, practice, policy and/or First Nations communities: Substance Drug Checking provides an example of intentional implementation of health equity and harm reduction principles within an overdose prevention response that is a research project generating evidence and knowledge to inform and advance practice and policy responses.

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