

## Collaborative surveillance and public health responses to illicit and emerging drugs in New South Wales

*David Atefi<sup>1</sup>, Gail Ashworth<sup>1</sup>, Robin Auld<sup>1</sup>, Isabel Brouwer<sup>2</sup>, Nicholas Buckley<sup>3</sup>, Trevor Chan<sup>4</sup>, Michelle Cretikos<sup>1</sup>, Una Cullinan<sup>2</sup>, Andrew Dawson<sup>3,5</sup>, Adrian Dunlop<sup>6</sup>, Nadine Ezard<sup>7</sup>, Tony Gill<sup>1</sup>, Naren Gunja<sup>5,8</sup>, Mary Harrod<sup>9</sup>, Christine Harvey<sup>1</sup>, Thomas Capell-Hattam<sup>9</sup>, Charles Henderson<sup>9</sup>, Una Nic Ionmhain<sup>10</sup>, Thanjira Jiranantakan<sup>1</sup>, Daniel Madeddu<sup>1</sup>, Catherine McDonald<sup>2</sup>, Sharon Neville<sup>2</sup>, Teresa O'Sullivan<sup>11</sup>, Lorraine Du Toit-Prinsloo<sup>2</sup>, Darren Roberts<sup>3,5</sup>, Therese Ryan<sup>12</sup>, Kelsey Seyfang<sup>2</sup>, Vanessa Shaw<sup>2</sup>, Michael Symonds<sup>2</sup>, Jason Tran<sup>2</sup>, Claire Turner<sup>1</sup>, Santiago Vazquez<sup>2</sup>, Deborah Zador<sup>1</sup>, Jared Brown<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Centre for Alcohol and Other Drugs, NSW Ministry of Health, Sydney, Australia, <sup>2</sup>Forensic & Analytical Science Service, NSW Health Pathology, Sydney, Australia, <sup>3</sup>Department of Drug Health, Sydney Local Health District, Sydney, Australia, <sup>4</sup>Emergency Care Institute, Agency for Clinical Innovation, Sydney, Australia, <sup>5</sup>NSW Poisons Information Centre, Sydney, Australia, <sup>6</sup>Drug & Alcohol Clinical Services, Hunter New England Local Health District, Newcastle, Australia, <sup>7</sup>Alcohol & Drug Service, St Vincent's Hospital, Sydney, Australia, <sup>8</sup>Department of Toxicology, Western Sydney Local Health District, Sydney, Australia, <sup>9</sup>NSW Users and AIDS Association, Sydney, Australia, <sup>10</sup>Department of Toxicology, South Western Sydney Local Health District, Sydney, Australia, <sup>11</sup>NSW Coroners Court, Sydney, Australia, <sup>12</sup>Centre for Epidemiology and Evidence, NSW Ministry of Health, Sydney, Australia

Presenter's email: [david.atefi@health.nsw.gov.au](mailto:david.atefi@health.nsw.gov.au)

**Background:** NSW Health operates a comprehensive illicit and emerging drug surveillance and response program as part of broader harm reduction initiatives. We describe the data sources utilised, and recent outputs from these activities.

**Description of Intervention:** NSW Health continually monitors multiple rapid surveillance data sources including from emergency departments, Poisons Information Centres, police drug seizures, coronial reports, toxicology and drug health services, the NSW Users and AIDS Association (NUAA), the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre, public health units, interjurisdictional counterparts and police. NSW Health undertakes selected comprehensive analysis of biological and substance samples associated with severe and unusual overdoses, and small quantity police seizures.

After conducting a risk assessment of identified signals, NSW Health may consult with the Standing Panel on Toxicity Risk to determine the public health response. Signals of concern are shared nationally through the Prompt Response Network.

**Implementation:** In the past year, 32 unique public health responses resulted from this collaboration. Responses are designed to the risk identified in collaboration with NUAA, and may include harm reduction messaging through peer-led organisations, public drug warnings, clinician alerts, clinical decision support, media releases, product recalls, policy review and enhanced distribution of antidotes.

Recent public health responses have included the detection of isotonitazene; high levels of lidocaine in cocaine; thebaine toxicity from poppy seed tea; and novel benzodiazepines and nitazenes in counterfeit alprazolam.

**Conclusion:** Ongoing surveillance is important to monitor emerging drug trends, rapidly identify signals of harm and develop and evaluate policy. Future data sources may include wastewater, residue testing and drug checking services.

**Implications for practice:** Multi-agency collaboration is vital in reducing drug harms across Australia. Ensuring laboratory capabilities to detect emerging substances of concern is key to timely responses. Ongoing research into consumers' awareness of, responses to and communication preferences for drug alerts will optimise public health outcomes.

**Disclosure of Interest Statement:** None to declare.