

Protection or Prohibition? The impact of the online safety code on harm reduction information.

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Background

In December 2025, the *Internet Search Engine Services Online Safety Code* came into force in Australia. The code requires internet search engine services to enact strict safeguards, protecting internet users under the age of 18 from 'harmful online content'. AIVL and our member network of peer-based Drug User Organisations and harm reduction programs are concerned that information relating to harm reduction, including blood-borne virus prevention, will be deemed 'harmful' and access will be restricted for young people and adults alike.

Methods

AIVL collaborated with members and national peak peer-based partners to understand and coordinate an ongoing response to the impact these new internet regulations may have on young people's and adults' access to web-based materials relating to evidence-based harm reduction, health promotion, and health education for substance use.

Results

A key challenge in this context is uncertainty, as the outcomes and full extent of the impact remain unclear. We have already seen a significant impact on AIVL members' social media presence, with Meta (Facebook, Instagram) accounts being removed and posts being restricted. AIVL is actively collecting anecdotal and quantitative data on content being removed or blocked.

Conclusion

Labelling harm reduction information 'harmful' entrenches stigma and discrimination against people who use drugs, reinforcing barriers to healthcare. Blocking access to online harm reduction information undermines evidence-based health promotion practice in Australia. As practitioners and advocates, we must discuss and reflect on this evolving shift in political digital economy.

Disclosure of Interest Statement

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