

## **DRUG RELATED HARMS AND RESPONSES AT NSW MUSIC FESTIVALS: THEN, NOW AND WHERE TO NEXT**

### **Authors:**

ANGELA MATHESON<sup>1</sup>, JESSICA Y HARPER<sup>1</sup>, SARAH NORMAN<sup>1</sup>, JAMES WILSON<sup>1</sup>, DANIEL MADEDDU<sup>1</sup>, JARED BROWN<sup>1,2</sup>, DARREN ROBERTS<sup>2</sup>, NICOLE WRIGHT<sup>2</sup>, ANDREW DAWSON<sup>2,3</sup>, CATHERINE MCDONALD<sup>4</sup>, VANESSA SHAW<sup>4</sup>, SANTIAGO VAZQUEZ<sup>4</sup>, MARY E HARROD<sup>5</sup>, CHARLES HENDERSON<sup>5</sup>, ERICA FRANKLIN<sup>5</sup>, TIM POWELL<sup>5</sup>, JACINTA BOURNE<sup>5</sup>, JULIA ROBINSON<sup>6</sup>, THANJIRA JIRANANTAKAN<sup>123</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Centre for Alcohol and Other Drugs, NSW Ministry of Health, Sydney, Australia*

<sup>2</sup>*NSW Poisons Information Centre, Sydney Children's Hospitals Network, Sydney, Australia*

<sup>3</sup>*Edith Collins Centre, Central Clinical School, The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia*

<sup>4</sup>*Forensic Toxicology, NSW Health Pathology, Forensic & Analytical Science Service, Lidcombe, Australia*

<sup>5</sup>*NSW Users and AIDS Association, Sydney, Australia*

<sup>6</sup>*Australian Festival Association, Australia*

### **Aims:**

1. Discuss a multisectoral public health approach to music festival harm reduction that combines best practice guidance and support, peer-based approaches to promoting safer patron behaviour, enhanced onsite medical capacity and strengthening the evidence base.
2. Explore the collaboration, compliance and problem-solving activities undertaken between government, industry and peer-based stakeholders to achieve the shared goal of reduced harms at events.
3. Provide lessons learnt, unexpected challenges and successes for session attendees to who may consider applying similar interventions in their local context.

**Chair:** Angela Matheson, Centre for Alcohol & Other Drugs, NSW Ministry of Health, Sydney, Australia

**Chair's email:** [angela.matheson@health.nsw.gov.au](mailto:angela.matheson@health.nsw.gov.au)

### **Disclosure of Interest Statement:**

*None.*

## **PRESENTATION 1: Sharing the goal: government, industry and peer organisations working to reduce drug harms at music festivals.**

### **Presenting Authors:**

JESSICA Y HARPER<sup>1</sup>, MARY E HARROD<sup>5</sup>, THANJIRA JIRANANTAKAN<sup>123</sup>, DANIEL MADEDDU<sup>1</sup>, ANGELA MATHESON<sup>1</sup>, SARAH NORMAN<sup>1</sup>, JULIA ROBINSON<sup>4</sup>, JAMES WILSON<sup>1</sup>,

<sup>1</sup>Centre for Alcohol and Other Drugs, NSW Ministry of Health, Sydney, Australia

<sup>2</sup>NSW Poisons Information Centre, Sydney Children's Hospitals Network, Sydney, Australia

<sup>3</sup>Edith Collins Centre, Central Clinical School, The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

<sup>4</sup>Australian Festival Association, Australia

<sup>5</sup>NSW Users & AIDS Association, Sydney, Australia

Presenter's email: [Jessica.harper1@health.nsw.gov.au](mailto:Jessica.harper1@health.nsw.gov.au)

**Introduction:** Up to 74% of NSW music festival attendees report recent use of illicit drugs<sup>1</sup>. While most people don't experience serious harm, across the 2017 to 2020 summer music festival seasons, there was a substantial increase in the severity of drug-related harms associated with some music festivals in NSW.

**Approach:** In response to this trend and the introduction of the *Music Festivals Act 2019*, the NSW Government implemented a cross-sector program of work to reduce drug-related harm at music festivals. Approaches include the development of the NSW Health *Guidelines for Music Festival Organisers: Music Festival Harm Reduction*, promoting safer patron behaviour through marketing campaigns and collaboration with peer-based harm reduction services, enhancing onsite medical capabilities and strengthening the evidence base to inform future strategies.

**Key Findings:** Since implementation of the Government's response there has been an increase in help-seeking behaviour, enhanced medical service provision and risks are better controlled. NSW Health has increased engagement with event organisers and other stakeholders.

### **Discussions and Conclusions:**

NSW Health and its partnering organisations have increased the investment in music festival safety in NSW, including additional resourcing by event organisers for medical capability and other harm reduction measures. The sustainability of the response is managed through a collaborative approach between NSW Health, industry stakeholders and peer organisations. These partnerships have assisted the sector in navigating challenges presented by COVID-19 and other emerging health issues, with the NSW Health Harm Reduction team being a trusted point of contact for stakeholders communicating with this large government department.

### **References**

1. Day, N., Criss, J., Griffiths, B., Gujral, S. K., John-Leader, F., Johnston, J. & Pit, S. (2018). Music festival attendees' illicit drug use, knowledge and practices regarding drug content and purity: a cross-sectional survey. *Harm reduction journal*, 15(1), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12954-017-0205-7>

## **PRESENTATION 2: Help where it's needed: ensuring minimum medical service provision at NSW music festivals.**

### **Presenting Authors:**

JAMES WILSON<sup>1</sup>, THANJIRA JIRANANTAKAN<sup>123</sup>, DANIEL MADEDDU<sup>1</sup>, ANGELA MATHESON<sup>1</sup>, JESSICA Y HARPER<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Centre for Alcohol and Other Drugs, NSW Ministry of Health, Sydney, Australia

<sup>2</sup>NSW Poisons Information Centre, Sydney Children's Hospitals Network, Sydney, Australia

<sup>3</sup>Edith Collins Centre, Central Clinical School, The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

Presenter's email: [James.Wilson3@health.nsw.gov.au](mailto:James.Wilson3@health.nsw.gov.au)

**Introduction:** Stimulant-induced hyperthermia at music festivals is most commonly associated with methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) toxicity in NSW, and appropriate pre-hospital care is essential to reduce the risk of severe illness and death.

**Approach:** There was a substantial increase in drug-related hyperthermic presentations and deaths at some NSW music festival events during the 2018-19 festival season. To respond, NSW Health implemented measures to ascertain and ensure appropriate minimum levels of clinical capacity for onsite medical providers to manage severe drug toxicity. The 2019 *Guidelines for Music Festival Event Organisers* outline a best practice approach to minimum medical staffing levels. The establishment of the *NSW Music Festivals Act 2019* has also provided a legislative framework to ensure that this minimum level of service is provided.

**Key Findings:** Since the implementation of the *Guidelines* and the Act, there has been a substantial decrease in deaths at NSW music festivals, with one death in the 2019-20 season (23 festivals) compared with five deaths the previous season (30 festivals). This 80% reduction in deaths between seasons occurred despite a continued and substantial number of critical presentations. Recent data has been heavily impacted by COVID-related restrictions and is still being assessed.

**Discussion and Conclusions:** Various factors can affect the severity of drug-related presentations at music festivals, including ambient temperature and drug purity. It is necessary to take all factors into account to better understand the impacts of this intervention.

**Implications for Practice or Policy:** Key learnings provided by health debriefs are used to inform future responses, and updates to the *Guidelines* where appropriate.

## **PRESENTATION 3: NSW Medical and Toxicity Surveillance for Drug Related Harms in Music Festival Settings**

### **Presenting Authors:**

THANJIRA JIRANANTAKAN<sup>1,2,3</sup>, ANGELA MATHESON<sup>1</sup>, JAMES WILSON<sup>1</sup>, JESSICA Y HARPER<sup>1</sup>, SARAH NORMAN<sup>1</sup>, SANTIAGO VAZQUEZ<sup>4</sup>, VANESSA SHAW<sup>4</sup>, CATHERINE MCDONALD<sup>4</sup>, DARREN ROBERTS<sup>2</sup>, NICOLE WRIGHT<sup>2</sup>, ANDREW DAWSON<sup>2,3</sup>, JARED BROWN<sup>1,2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>*Centre for Alcohol and Other Drugs, NSW Ministry of Health, Sydney, Australia*

<sup>2</sup>*NSW Poisons Information Centre, Sydney Children's Hospitals Network, Sydney, Australia*

<sup>3</sup>*Edith Collins Centre, Central Clinical School, The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia*

<sup>4</sup>*Forensic Toxicology, NSW Health Pathology, Forensic & Analytical Science Service, Lidcombe, Australia*

**Presenter's email:** [Thanjira.Jiranantakan@health.nsw.gov.au](mailto:Thanjira.Jiranantakan@health.nsw.gov.au)

**Introduction:** NSW Health established a surveillance system to detect patients who became unwell after attending subject music festivals. Clinical samples from patients with critical conditions were referred to the Prescription, Recreational and Illicit Substance Evaluation (PRISE) Program for comprehensive toxicology testing.

**Methods:** The PRISE Program database from July 2018 to December 2021 was reviewed to extract patient characteristics, notification sources, toxicological results and outcomes of patients presenting from music festivals.

### **Results:**

There were 82 referrals to the PRISE Program over 3.5 years, with 78 cases (95%) undergoing toxicology testing. Sixty-four case notifications (78%) were from NSW Ambulance Forward Commanders, NSW Poisons Information Centre and hospital-based toxicology services. Active case finding identified additional 17 cases (21%) through the NSW Public Health Rapid, Emergency, Disease and Syndromic Surveillance (PHREDSS) system and one case from the media. Most cases were male (54, 66%). The median age of patients was 21.2 years (IQR 20-25, range 16-41 years). The incidence of referrals decreased significantly following the first NSW Covid-19 pandemic lockdown (4 cases from April 2020 to December 2021 versus 78 cases from July 2018 to March 2020). There were six deaths (7%), all prior to January 2020. MDMA was the primary substance found in the entire cohort. Other substances detected most commonly included cocaine, methamphetamine and benzodiazepines. Results were reported to clinicians and patients were informed where possible.

**Discussion and Conclusions:** Drug-related harms at music festivals in NSW were predominantly due to MDMA, cocaine and methamphetamine. New psychoactive substances were not observed. The toxicology results from the PRISE Program and seized sample analysis through the Combined Surveillance and Monitoring of Seized Samples

(CoSMoSS) Project were integrated to facilitate risk assessment and public health interventions.

**Implications for Practice or Policy:** This study's toxicology and patient profile inform strategic planning for risk communications and harm minimisation measures.

## **PRESENTATION 4: A comprehensive approach to ensuring a sustainable and effective peer-based harm reduction intervention at NSW music festivals**

### **Presenting Authors:**

MARY E HARROD<sup>1</sup>, CHARLES HENDERSON<sup>1</sup>, TIM POWELL<sup>1</sup>, JACINTA BOURNE<sup>1</sup>, ERICA FRANKLIN<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>*NSW Users and AIDS Association, Sydney, Australia*

Presenter's email: [maryh@nuaa.org.au](mailto:maryh@nuaa.org.au)

**Introduction / Issues:** DanceWize NSW (DWNSW) is a program of the NSW Users and AIDS Association. DWNSW was funded in 2017 by the NSW Ministry of Health (MoH) with an initial aim of operating at “bush doofs” and unregulated festivals. DWNSW was based on the successful DanceWize program operated by Harm Reduction Victoria. The program has evolved within a short period of time to become a highly recognisable and regarded harm reduction intervention with a substantial social media reach supporting harm reduction initiatives with diverse partners.

**Approach:** DWNSW is a peer-led and staffed program that offers care space, roving and education services at festivals in NSW. The strategic approach of DWNSW is to promote peer-based harm reduction in the policy space; program development through ongoing engagement and consultation with volunteers; partnerships with multiple stakeholders; robust data collection and promoting of a supportive, safe environment for staff and volunteers.

**Key Findings:** DWNSW has operated through 3 festival seasons. We have attended up to 23 festivals per season, supported thousands of patrons and have over 200 volunteers. The social media following is ~10,000 with drug alert posts produced in a partnership with the MoH reaching hundreds of thousands of people. Peer based harm reduction has also been enshrined in key documents regulating music festivals.

**Discussion and Conclusions:** With appropriate planning and implementation, peer-based harm reduction can be an effective and valuable partner to mainstream services in highly visible settings.

### **Disclosure of Interest Statement:**

DanceWize NSW is funded by the NSW Ministry of Health Centre for Alcohol and Other Drugs. Some of the costs of festival interventions are covered by promoters. The program does not receive funds from pharmaceutical companies or businesses promoting the use of alcohol.

**Discussion Section:** The discussion will involve representatives from a peer-based user organisation, clinical toxicology and public health teams. They will share some of the challenges and benefits of collaborating across a necessarily diverse stakeholder group, that includes Liquor & Gaming NSW, music festival industry representatives, onsite private medical providers, NSW Ambulance and public health and other teams within NSW Health. The panel will discuss and answer questions from the audience relating to the NSW Government response model, and key harm reduction components that are implemented before, during and after music festival events. The impact of Covid-19 on music festivals events, patron behaviour, and the challenges it poses regarding data collection and interpretation will be discussed. The panel will provide future directions in music festival harm reduction in the NSW setting, and lessons learnt for the benefit of other jurisdictions undertaking similar work.