

BCH POSITION STATEMENTS

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Pill testing of illicit drugs

BCH Role

Ballarat Community Health works in collaboration with partners across the Grampians Loddon Mallee to improve health outcomes for people who use drugs. Anyone who consumes any illicitly manufactured pill puts themselves at risk of adverse consequences, including death. Advocating for pill testing is a natural extension of Ballarat Community Health's harm reduction philosophy.

Key Messages

- It is not safe to consume illicit drugs. However, if people choose to consume a substance, a harm reduction strategy is our best option to keep them safe.
- Harm reduction refers to policies, programmes and practices that aim to reduce the harms associated with the use of psychoactive drugs in people unable or unwilling to stop. The defining features are the focus on the prevention of harm rather than on the prevention of drug use itself, and the focus on people who continue to use drugs.
<https://www.hri.global/what-is-harm-reduction>
- Harm reduction strategies impact beyond the person who uses drugs. They aim to reduce the adverse health, social and economic consequences of drug use for the user, their families and the wider community. For more information about harm reduction see [National Drug Strategy 2017-2026](#).
- Pill testing, as a harm reduction strategy, is not new. It has been in practice internationally since the 1990s, with services currently available in many countries within Europe and the Americas, as well as New Zealand. <https://health.act.gov.au/about-our-health-system/population-health/pill-testing>
- The chemical makeup of illicit drugs is varied and highly unpredictable. Pill testing **does not make the tested drug safe**, but does provide for a more informed decision about whether to take the drug or not.
- Evidence suggests that in the face of an unexpected pill test result, many consumers choose not to consume the pill. (Barrett et al. 2017)
- Evidence suggests that pill testing services will only be accessed if service users are guaranteed protection from arrest or targeting by law enforcement. (Barrett et al. 2017)
- Pill testing services provide an opportunity to engage with people who use illicit drugs about harm reduction in general.

Recommendations

Pill testing is a valuable component of a comprehensive harm reduction approach to illicit drug use. As such Ballarat Community Health recommends:

- That pill testing trials be introduced across Australia as a collaboration between public health providers and law enforcement.
- That consumers are aware that by having their pill tested, **it does not mean that it is safe for them to consume**, but rather provides them with information to make a more informed decision about consumption
- That the service be offered in tandem with information provision about other harm reduction strategies e.g. *“safer use”* and available Alcohol and Other Drug treatment services.

Ballarat Community Health provides direct services as well as education, support, information and advocacy to both clients and professionals in the Alcohol and Other Drug area.

For more information contact:

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