

Our Vision: *Communities are well-informed about the harms of illicit drugs and empowered with anti-drug strategies*

Drug Free Australia (NSW)
9 Old Farm Place
Ourimbah NSW 2258
Phone: (02) 4362 9839
drugfreeaust@drugfree.org.au

drugfree.org.au
ABN: 63 312 656 641

Media contact

Gary Christian
Research Director
Drug Free
Australia

(02) 4362 9839
0422 163 141

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THE SCIENCE - POLICING NOT THE CAUSE OF ECSTASY DEATHS

The media is being fed misinformation by pill testing advocates about the role of policing in festival deaths as the NSW Inquest into six deaths continues this week. This misinformation is totally contrary to the existing science on ecstasy deaths.

The notion currently pushed to the media is that some festival attendees die because policing, particularly with drug detection dogs, panics ecstasy users into swallowing all pills at once, causing ecstasy 'overdoses'. NDARC's Dr Monica Barrett has even called for the legalisation of ecstasy premised on this supposed policing 'threat' to users' lives.

Yet the science on MDMA (ecstasy) indicates that ecstasy overdose is rare, with users easily surviving up to 77 times more MDMA than has caused deaths in others,¹ showing that this new narrative about policing is simply false. Furthermore, Australian pill testing advocates are disingenuously contradicting the scientific advice of their more senior harm reduction organisations in the USA,² who are honest about the science of overdose rarity.

Drug Free Australia (DFA) has previously shown that ecstasy deaths are either due to allergic-like reactions of users to MDMA, where even tiny amounts can be lethal, or due to MDMA being used in combination with other legal or illegal drugs.³ Pill testing screens for neither cause. DFA also condemns the current false juxtaposition of the six NSW deaths with alleged zero deaths at a Netherlands festival, which is rendered false by evidence from the only scientific study of 82 MDMA-related deaths in Australia over a 5 year period.⁴

Gary Christian, DFA's Research Director explains the Australian evidence. "First, the science shows that MDMA has been responsible for literally hundreds of deaths in Australia since 1995, yet this is the same deadly substance that pill testing greenlights worldwide.⁵ Second, MDMA is just as deadly anywhere else in the world, but some European countries have a very poor record monitoring drug deaths.⁶ Third, the study confirms that most Australians die from normal recreational doses of MDMA, not 'overdoses.'⁷ Fourth, 62% of Australian ecstasy deaths are at home,⁸ where policing cannot possibly cause these deaths, such is the deadly nature of this substance," said Mr Christian. "And Dr Barrett's legalisation call falls to the very same science. With cannabis legalisation literally doubling adult cannabis use within its first four years in Colorado,⁹ we could conceivably see a doubling of MDMA deaths if legalised."

Drug Free Australia's extensive review of Australian and international evidence against false claims by pill testing advocates can be found at:

https://www.drugfree.org.au/images/pdf-files/library/Needle_Syringe/PillTestingpaper-evidenceforStateandTerritoryParliaments.pdf

- ¹ <https://academic.oup.com/bja/article/96/6/678/326917> see paragraph after Table 1 p 679
- ² <https://dancesafe.org/mdma-related-deaths-stop-calling-them-overdoses/> also https://www.drugpolicy.org/sites/default/files/DPA_Fact_Sheet_MDMA.PDF
- ³ See https://www.drugfree.org.au/images/pdf-files/library/Needle_Syringe/PillTestingpaper-evidenceforStateandTerritoryParliaments.pdf pages 29-31
- ⁴ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0376871609002014?via%3Dihub>
- ⁵ For example, <https://dancesafe.org/product/complete-set-of-all-8-testing-kits/>
- ⁶ See page 52 of https://www.drugfree.org.au/images/pdf-files/library/Needle_Syringe/PillTestingpaper-evidenceforStateandTerritoryParliaments.pdf
- ⁷ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0376871609002014?via%3Dihub> see explanation of this data at p 25 of https://www.drugfree.org.au/images/pdf-files/library/Needle_Syringe/PillTestingpaper-evidenceforStateandTerritoryParliaments.pdf
- ⁸ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0376871609002014?via%3Dihub> p 257
- ⁹ (https://parliament.nt.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/573820/Submission-No.-2-Drug-Free-Australia.pdf p26ff