

Pill Testing Is Long Overdue: An Interview with Victorian MP Colleen Hartland

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The current campaign to trial a pill testing service at an Australian music festival began in February 2016. The push was led by prominent harm reduction advocates Dr Alex Wodak, Dr David Caldicott, and Will Tregoning.

The impetus behind the renewed calls to implement this harm minimisation approach were the six drug-related deaths that occurred at music festivals around the country over a thirteen month period ending in December 2015.

Tragically, for those young people who have died – in what could have been preventable deaths – since that time, a pill testing trial has still not taken place. This is despite numerous proponents speaking out in favour of one, and a groundswell of support in the community.

The rising death toll

In the state of Victoria, young people are continuing to die. The state coroner has outlined that in 2012, one person died in an MDMA-related incident. In 2015, there were five reported deaths, while in 2016, the number of deaths rose to 13.

Last January, three people died and 20 were hospitalised after taking a bad batch of ecstasy around Melbourne's Chapel Street nightclub precinct. The pills were actually a mix of MDMA, and the much more dangerous drug NBOME.

While last Saturday, a 19-year-old man had to be airlifted from the Beyond the Valley festival in the Gippsland, due to a suspected drug overdose. On arrival at the Alfred Hospital in Melbourne, doctors confirmed the teenager was in a critical condition.

This latest incident prompted long-term pill testing advocate Victorian Greens MLC Colleen Hartland to step forward and remind the community that this tragedy, along with the others before it, could have been prevented if pill testing services were available.

It's evidence-based

Pill testing is nothing new. It's been implemented in countries across Europe, such as the Netherlands, Switzerland and Germany, for decades now. Indeed, it's so established that the European Union produced pill testing best practice guidelines.

And it's a simple procedure. The owner of a drug can have it tested by health professionals using laboratory equipment. Minutes later, they receive the test results and can then make an informed decision about whether to take the substance.

If they decide not to take it, they can dispose of their drug in a provided amnesty bin.

And it's getting closer

The ACT government made a landmark decision last September, when it approved a pill testing trial for a music festival. Although, the initial attempt fell through, it looks as if the STA-SAFE consortium might be running the trial at the Groovin the Moo festival in April.

And on November 29 last year, the Victorian Greens gave the first reading in state parliament of the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Lab-Grade Pill Testing Pilot) Bill 2017. If agreed to, the

legislation will pave the way for pill testing in Victoria.

Sydney Criminal Lawyers spoke to Colleen Hartland, the Victorian Greens health spokesperson, about the positive outcomes that pill testing services produce, the urgent need for their implementation in Australia, and the likelihood that a trial will get the go ahead in Victoria.

Firstly, Ms Hartland, just how badly are pill testing services needed in Victoria right now? And how overdue, would you say, their implementation across Australia is?

They're a decade overdue. Especially, considering that in Victoria this week a young man, who it's suspected had a drug overdose, had to be airlifted from a festival in Gippsland.

Every festival season we are reminded as to why we need this. In England, where they have huge festivals in comparison to ours, they are able to do lab-grade testing. So, I don't understand why we can't do it here.

On November 29 last year, the Victorian Greens gave the first reading of a bill that if passed would allow for laboratory-grade testing of pills at major events.

How would this proposed pill testing system be implemented in your state?

We would want to trial first. Because you always need to trial these kinds of things to make sure that you've got it exactly right.

There's enough festivals out there, who I believe would be willing to be the subject of a trial. And you would look at the experience in Europe, where they have been doing this for years, to make sure you've got it right for the Australian condition.

So, that legislation would allow for the initial trial, and if that was successful, you could move on to more?

That's right. You always have to trial these things.

What type of events would you be looking at making them available at?

It would be the big festivals. Every state has their festival season. And that would be the aim, because that's where you get the mass numbers of people.

Whereas, trying to do it in clubs, at this stage, would just about be impossible. Even though, last year, in Victoria, there was a terrible incident in a nightclub in Prahran, where people died, and several were extremely ill afterwards.

Now, the obvious benefit of a pill testing trial is it would save lives. But, what are some of the other benefits these services have?

You actually reduce the amount of drugs people take. Because they realise what they've got is potentially deadly, or extremely dangerous. So, you do actually substantially reduce the amount of drugs that are taken.

Also, it is an opportunity for direct, non-judgemental counselling with people who are intending to take drugs. They give good advice about the potential dangers.

It actually has these side benefits. The law and order lobby say, "You've just got say no." But, in fact, this actually lets you engage with people.

In February last year, after the Chapel Street incident, you were also proposing that the state government set up a postal-type pill testing service.

Yes, and this happens in Europe quite commonly. I've been quite interested in it. People can actually give the drug that they've got in an anonymous way. It can be tested.

And then in Europe, they do alerts. As I understand it, on weekly basis, it goes up on a website. People can check that website, and look at what they've got, and work out if they've got the one that they are saying is really dangerous.

It is another way of dealing with recreational drug use that relates to the club.

So, somebody can send in a sample of a pill they have. They don't need to receive the feedback directly, as they can check on a website that will tell them if it is dangerous.

That's right. The alert goes to anybody who wants to log in and they can see that alert.

Would that proposal still be on the cards?

Yes. But, we need to deal with the actual festivals first. We need to deal with the trial. But, that would all be part of it as well.

What is the support like for pill testing in the Victorian community?

We've done needle exchanges. We're now about to do a trial of a supervised injecting room. It's all part of harm minimisation.

Some of our best advocates for this are parents that have had the horrible phone call, telling them that their child has died, or that they're in hospital and seriously ill. People just want to keep their kids safe.

I'm in my late fifties. I don't drink or smoke. And I don't do any sort of drugs. I would encourage anybody not to. But, I'm also realistic. People are going to. And I want to keep them safe.

And what is the government's official position?

Total blank no. But, they also said that about the supervised injecting room. You've just got to keep hammering them.

But, the evidence from Europe shows pill testing services save lives, as well as ensure that bad batches of drugs are kept off the street.

So considering that, what do you think the implications are of the Andrews government continuing to reject these proposals?

We put people at risk. We also overload hospitals with drug overdoses that they shouldn't have to deal with.

And very much like supervised injecting rooms, you are going to be taking away a burden on the health system, and the criminal justice system.

Let's be sensible, and not continue with our head in the sand. It's happening. Let's not pretend it's not.

But, as you mentioned, the Andrews government did make a complete about-face when it gave the go ahead for a safe injecting facility for North Richmond in October.

In light of this, do you think there's more potential for the government to consider another harm minimisation initiative like pill testing?

We really need to be blunt about what happened in North Richmond. A couple of things did.

There was a huge amount of pressure from local residents wanting that. There was a really strong, well organised campaign from the residents.

There was also the fact that it's a really marginal seat now, and 800 votes turned it into a Greens seat. Those two issues, and the fact that Fiona Patten had put up a bill.

There were a number of factors that work into that, but the politics was there. And clearly, there were a number of ministers within the government who supported the supervised injecting room. But, the political decision in the end, I think, is what forced it over the line.

As you know, Sydney has had a supervised injecting room for 13 years, and it's been incredibly successful.

The ACT government approved a pill testing trial at a music festival last September. Although, the initial trial fell through, it looks likely it will take place in early 2018.

What did you think about the ACT government taking the step to become the first government in this country to give the go ahead to a pill testing trial?

I thought it was fantastic. It was really unfortunate it fell through. My understanding from Greens MPs is that because it was on Commonwealth land, that's what stymied it in the end.

But, I thought it was a really progressive move from Labor and the Greens to do that. It's about time.

And lastly, the Victorian Greens pill testing bill is set to be debated early this year. Fiona Patten's safe injecting room bill was before parliament early last year, and despite some moves to halt its passage, it was eventually passed.

Are you expecting 2018 to be the year when we'll see pill testing services rolled out in Victoria?

I'm hopeful. I'm always hopeful.

What happened with Fiona's bill, is there was her bill, but then there was a government bill. So, that's the way it always works. There were some changes in the government's bill, compared to what Fiona had put forward.

Governments never accept private member's bills. They take them, and they rework them as their own bills.

So, that has the potential to happen with the Greens pill testing bill.

Yes, it does. And we will be campaigning right through the election for this. We've been doing this for over a year now. And it's something that we think is the next step in harm minimisation.

Ms Hartland, thanks very much for taking the time out to speak with us today.

Not a problem.