

# ATODA Policy Position Statement

## Drug Checking

### Key Messages

- Drug checking (also known as pill testing) is the chemical analysis of drug samples to identify the chemical composition and purity. The objective of drug checking is to better inform people who use drugs of the contents of their drugs and reduce the risks associated with drug use, including overdose.
- National and international evidence indicates strong harm reduction benefits from both event-specific and fixed site drug checking services.
- Drug checking provides an opportunity for individuals to have a confidential, non-judgemental, evidence-based discussion regarding their drug use with peer educators and other health professionals.
- Drug checking services can also act as important pathways for marginalised and stigmatised population groups to be referred to other alcohol, tobacco and other drug (ATOD) treatment and harm reduction services, health care and social services.
- The term drug checking is preferred to pill testing to clarify that most services of this nature test a range of drug types, not only those in pill form.

### ATODA Policy Position (summary)

- Drug checking services provide a critical role in a harm reduction approach to reducing drug-related harms to individuals and the broader community.
- ATODA recommends that the ACT Government fund ongoing drug checking services in both fixed sites and event-specific applications, informed by the findings of relevant evaluations and pilots.
- Fixed site drug checking services should be co-located with ATOD and other health services, in order to facilitate access to health care, social and other services through existing referral pathways in a non-stigmatising environment.
- The design and evaluation of drug checking services in the ACT has included consultation with peers and service participants. It is critical peers continue to influence current and future service developments.
- Drug checking services should prioritise open and timely access to public health information generated by the checking process to ensure that drug checking data can inform broader population health policy and contribute to early warning systems.

**Date Adopted:** 1 May 2023

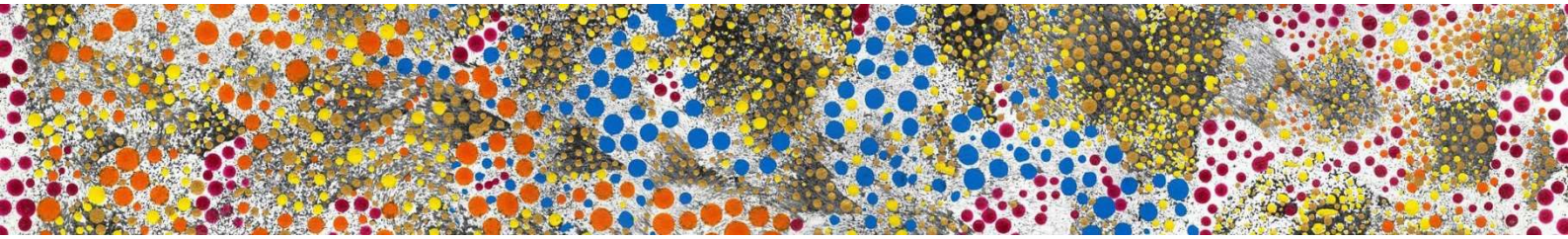
**Contact:** ATODA CEO at [info@atoda.org.au](mailto:info@atoda.org.au) or (02) 6249 6358.

### Note

While the term AOD (alcohol and other drug) is commonly used to refer to the alcohol, tobacco and other drug sector, ATODA's preference is to use the term ATOD. This acknowledges the role that specialist service providers in this sector play in providing tobacco cessation support, and because tobacco use is the leading preventable cause of the burden of disease in Australia, contributing far more than alcohol or all illicit drugs combined.

### Disclaimer

The views expressed in this Policy Position Statement are ATODA's alone. However this Statement was reviewed by the Specialist ACT ATOD Executives Group and the views of people who use drugs were incorporated via input from the ACT consumer peak, Canberra Alliance for Harm Minimisation and Advocacy (CAHMA) and through consideration of research involving consumers. As a policy position statement rather than a decision-making process, the development of this statement was outside the scope of ATODA's statement on [Involving People who Use Drugs in Decision-Making Processes](#), however that statement should inform any decision-making that may result from consideration of the recommendations made here.



## Background

Drug checking is the analysis of illicit drugs to identify their contents, in order to provide people who use drugs an opportunity to learn about their drug contents and make an informed decision based on their results. The objective of drug checking is to prevent health and other related harms associated with drug use, including both short and long-term injury and death, as well as reduce drug related harms within the broader community. Drug checking aligns with a harm reduction approach as articulated in the National Drug Strategy 2017-2026.<sup>1</sup>

Drug use is associated with a range of short and long-term health harms. Some of the most common risks of drug use include overdose, dependency, injury resulting from intoxication, blood borne viruses (associated with injecting drugs), and other health, public and social harms.<sup>2</sup> The range of potential harms constantly changes due to altered, contaminated and new substances regularly entering the market. New psychoactive substances (NPSs) are frequently created, and introduced to drug markets.<sup>3</sup> The chemicals that make up these drugs, and their levels of toxicity, are largely unknown to consumers, health workers and law enforcement personnel.

Fixed site drug checking facilities typically operate within a safe, non-stigmatising environment, and may be co-located with other health facilities. Drug checking can also be delivered at a temporary event-specific site such as at a music festival.<sup>4</sup>

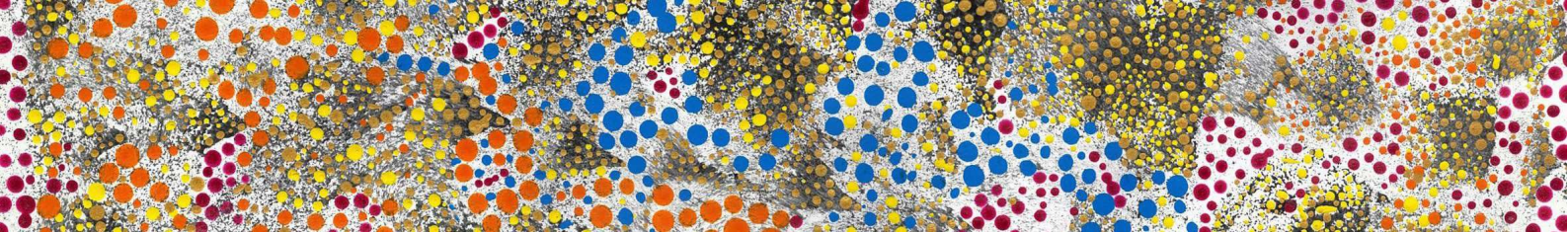
Support among the Australian population for drug checking is high, with the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) reporting that in 2019, 70% of Canberrans supported drug checking as a harm reduction initiative to address illicit drug use (well above the national average of 57%).<sup>5</sup> Event-specific drug checking sites were supported by 63% of the Australian population.<sup>6</sup> Of people who had recently used drugs, 78% indicated support for drug checking.<sup>2</sup> Health practitioners also show a high level of support for drug checking services.<sup>7, 8</sup>

While it is the population of people who use drugs who will gain the most benefit from drug checking services, the wider community also benefits.<sup>4</sup> Drug checking services have the potential to save lives and to reduce pressure on law enforcement, emergency services and emergency departments.<sup>9</sup> Adverse events and fatal overdoses are traumatic for the person's family, friends and communities. Families and friends who have experienced these tragic circumstances have been actively campaigning for drug checking services. The evidence suggests that drug checking services do not increase the use of drugs within the community.<sup>4, 8-10</sup>

The ACT has demonstrated its commitment to harm reduction approaches such as drug checking, trialing both fixed (current extended pilot) and event-specific drug checking sites (in 2018 and 2019). There is an opportunity for these initiatives to become embedded within the health service system in the ACT.

## Evidence

There is reliable evidence indicating the efficacy of both fixed site and event-specific drug checking services nationally and internationally.<sup>11, 12</sup> Studies indicate that drug checking services can increase information sharing about harm reduction, provide useful insights to inform drug alerts and policy/service interventions, decrease polydrug use and reduce the quantity of drugs consumed.<sup>4, 12</sup> Significant associations have also been found between intention to consume and test results.<sup>13</sup> For example, in the ACT an interim evaluation of the fixed site pilot CanTEST found that 18% of drugs were discarded after being tested.<sup>12</sup>



## **Australia**

### **Fixed site drug checking**

In 2022, the ACT government launched Australia's first fixed site drug checking service pilot, CanTEST Health and Drug Checking Service (CanTEST).<sup>14</sup> CanTEST aims to reduce harms experienced by people who use illicit drugs and increase access to health services. CanTEST is operated by Directions Health Services, in partnership with Canberra Alliance for Harm Minimisation and Advocacy (CAHMA) and Pill Testing Australia.<sup>14</sup> CanTEST offers a range of free services including chemical analysis, information, education and specialist advice, AOD brief interventions and on-site health care.<sup>14</sup> CanTEST also provides data to assist with monitoring drug trends in the ACT, by issuing public drug alerts for dangerous and/or emerging drugs and providing regular public updates on drug checking results.<sup>14</sup> These reports can help inform consumers, health services, policymakers, law enforcement and the broader community, and help identify potentially lethal substances. The interim evaluation for CanTEST found that over 80% of service users accepted an AOD or healthcare intervention.<sup>12</sup> Over the first three months, 370 AOD health interventions were conducted with service users, and 62% of service users reported that this was their first opportunity in which they discussed their AOD use with health care professionals.<sup>12</sup> The evaluation clearly indicates an uptake in AOD interventions for people who use drugs, particularly amongst those who may not have otherwise accessed an intervention, demonstrating the broader harm reduction effects of a fixed site drug checking service. The service also facilitated access to naloxone for 30 service users (naloxone is a life-saving medicine that rapidly reverses opioid overdose).<sup>12</sup>

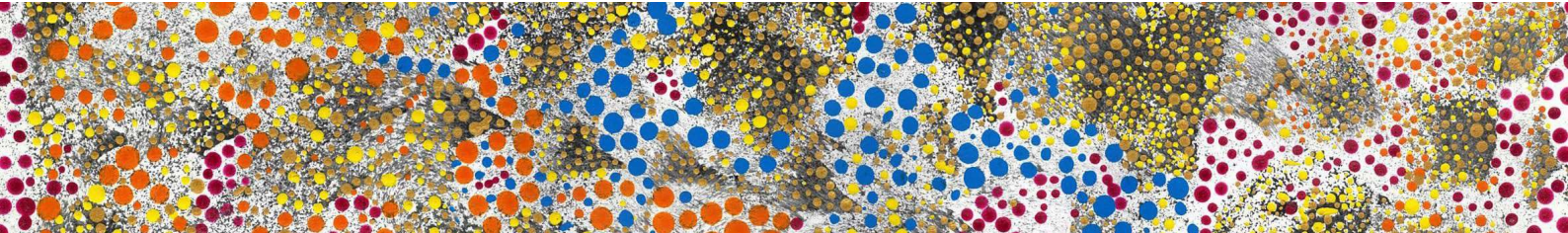
CanTEST has been very positively received by the ACT community and more broadly. Local and national media reports and public commentary have highlighted the results and harm reduction benefits of drug checking services and assisted to promulgate the results and cautions more broadly. In February 2023, the Queensland Government announced a drug checking trial at fixed and mobile locations, noting the ACT's pilot and interim findings.<sup>15</sup>

ATODA commends the progress and initiative of the ACT Government in implementing a six-month pilot, and the seven—month extension of the fixed site drug checking service to August 2023, pending receipt of the final evaluation report. The ACT is the first jurisdiction in Australia to trial a fixed site drug checking service, and as such CanTEST evaluation findings are an important resource to inform future direction in the ACT and other jurisdictions (as demonstrated by Queensland's reforms) and, as such, should continue to be made publicly available.

### **Event-specific drug checking**

To date, Canberra is the only jurisdiction in Australia to have trialed two government sanctioned event-specific pill-testing sites at the Groovin the Moo music festival in 2018 and 2019.<sup>16, 17</sup> These event-specific drug checking sites were evaluated by the Australian National University, and were well received by clients and stakeholders.<sup>16</sup> The evaluation found positive harm reduction benefits and strong evidence to support future implementations of event-specific drug checking.<sup>16, 18, 19</sup>

The ACT Government has developed *The Festivals Pill Testing Policy* which provides a guide for implementing drug checking (referred to as pill testing in that document) as a harm minimisation measure at public events to reduce drug related harms to individuals and the broader community.<sup>4</sup> It details the importance of a health approach, involving timely drug checking, information and data sharing, brief interventions and information, peer based support, safe and secure disposal, and consideration by event organisers regarding the feasibility of facilitating drug checking at public events.<sup>4</sup>



A critical aspect of harm reduction services at events such as music festivals is involvement of peers. In the ACT drug checking services at Groovin the Moo were supported by Dancewize, an outreach service utilizing peer-based harm reduction education and support to reduce harmful drug use and to provide referrals and resources in a non-stigmatizing environment.<sup>19</sup> The evidence indicates that the combination of a drug checking service with a peer service is likely to be most effective in reducing harms in a festival environment.<sup>12, 16</sup>

As an indicator for the need of event-specific drug checking sites, while CanTEST extended its operating hours in December 2022 to provide drug checking services for people attending a music festival where drug checking services were not available, CanTEST was not able to meet the demand.<sup>20</sup> This highlights a need to ensure event-specific drug checking services are in place at events like music festivals to reduce the pressure upon fixed drug checking sites, and ensure consumers are able to access the service.

### ***International***

Drug checking has been operating in over 20 countries across the globe, particularly in Europe, since the 1990s.<sup>21</sup> The evidence does not suggest an uptake in drug use as a result of either fixed site or event-specific drug checking sites.

### **ATODA Policy Position**

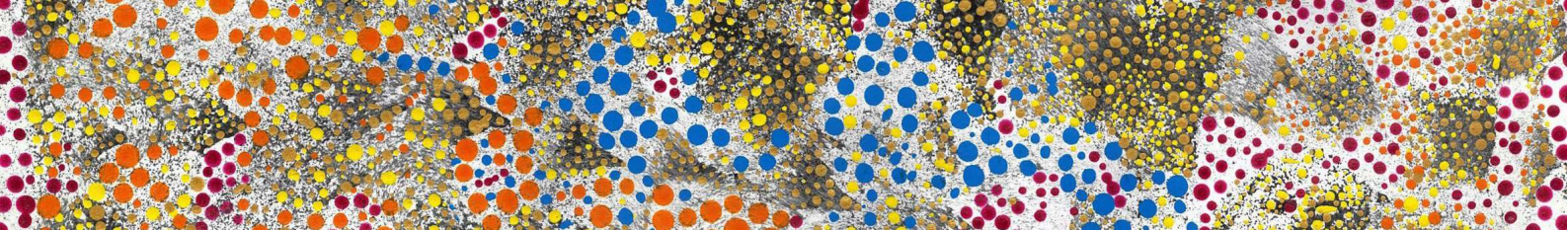
ATODA finds convincing signals from local, national and international evidence that drug checking has significant harm reduction benefits and should be utilised in both event-specific and fixed site forms.<sup>12, 22</sup> Drug checking facilities in the ACT would:

- provide education and resources on how to reduce harms associated with drug use<sup>12, 16, 21</sup>
- save lives and reduce risks associated with drug use through early warning systems and public health alerts by identifying possibly dangerous and emerging drugs<sup>4, 11, 12, 21, 23</sup>
- save lives by reducing the number of fatal overdoses from drug use<sup>12, 21, 24</sup>
- support positive interactions between vulnerable groups and the ATOD treatment sector<sup>12, 14, 21</sup>
- improve the relationship between some of the most marginalised populations, the ATOD sector, health and community services<sup>11, 12, 25</sup>
- monitor drug trends to assist and inform consumers, researchers, policymakers, law enforcement and the broader community<sup>12, 16, 21</sup>
- align with the harm reduction principle, one of the three pillars of harm minimisation in the National Drug Strategy 2017-2026<sup>1</sup>

### **Designing drug checking facilities in the ACT**

ATODA commends the initiative of the ACT Government in funding a fixed-site drug checking pilot in the ACT and would welcome future permanent drug checking services at fixed sites and event-specific (mobile) services, aligned with current harm reduction strategies.

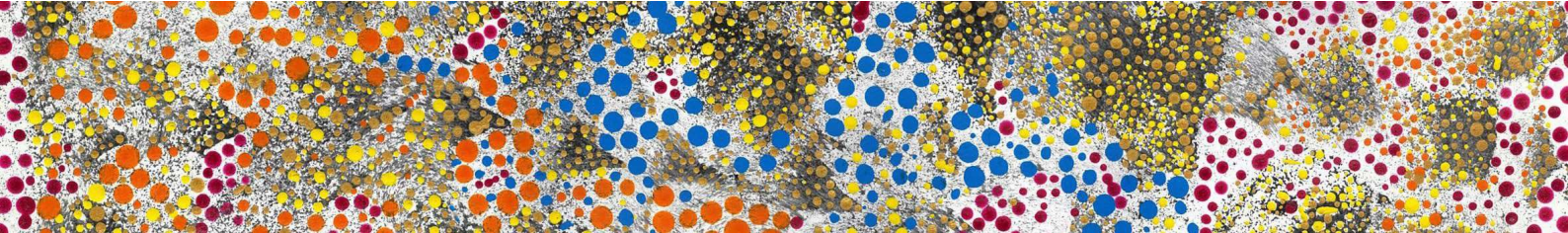
The current fixed-site model was designed in collaboration with peers, ACT Government, including ACT Health and Police, and people with expertise in drug checking, taking on board the learnings from both Groovin the Moo pilots and overseas services. The ANU evaluation of the fixed-site service also draws heavily on the views of people using the service and other key stakeholders.



Further development of drug checking services in the ACT should be influenced by the final CanTEST evaluation report, Groovin the Moo evaluations and international evidence, in collaboration with peers and other experts in the field. Drug checking services should prioritise open and timely access to information to ensure that drug checking data can inform broader population health policy and contribute to early warning systems.

It is essential that any permanent drug checking services in the ACT include the following features of the current model implemented in the ACT, that is designed to complement related health and harm reduction services in the ACT. This includes no-fee-for service, with real time interaction, drug checking, information, education and intervention, as well as access to health care and relevant ATOD services through existing referral pathways. It is important that any drug checking site does not expose an individual to potential criminal prosecution, and continues to ensure anonymity and safety of consumers and onsite disposal of unwanted drugs.

It is also critical that drug checking services permanently established in the ACT continue to provide clear timely sharing of data and early warning alerts so that harm reduction information provided to service participants is also made available to other people who use drugs and health and emergency service providers. It is also important to continue to ensure that sophisticated technology and appropriately skilled technicians are available as part of the service to ensure accurate analyses and information sharing.<sup>26</sup> The design of the space is also critical to allow for confidential harm reduction conversations and health interventions.



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