

24 June 2021

Committee Secretariat
Health Select Committee
Parliament Buildings
Wellington

Drug and Substance Checking Submission

Tēnā koe

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a written submission to the Select Committee on the Drug and Substance Checking Legislation Bill (No 2).

Regional Public Health (RPH) is the public health unit for the greater Wellington region (Wairarapa, Hutt Valley and Capital & Coast District Health Boards). Our purpose is to improve and protect the health of the population in the greater Wellington region with a focus on achieving equity. RPH have contracts to reduce harm in alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. Our core Ministry of Health contract covers the greater Wellington region and the Community Action on Youth and Drugs (CAYAD) youth contract is specific to the Hutt Valley.

We work with our community to make it a healthier and safer place to live. We promote good health, prevent disease, and improve the quality of life for our population.

The reason for this submission is to express our support for the Drug and Substance Checking Bill. The Ministry of Health requires us to reduce potential health risks and promote good health by various means, which includes making submissions on matters of importance to the communities we serve.

We are happy to provide further advice or clarification on any of the points raised in our written submission. We **do** wish to make an oral submission. The contact point for this submission is:

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Ngā mihi

Dr Stephen Palmer
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Background - CAYAD Hutt Valley

Community Action on Youth and Drugs (CAYAD) Hutt Valley sits with Regional Public Health (RPH) and was developed due to the considerable amount of community concern about illicit drugs.

CAYAD uses a community action approach that is a strategy for creating community-based change towards specific social and environmental policy objectives at a national and community level.

It is informed by evidence including local, cultural and academic knowledge, and relies on developing and mobilising capability and leadership from local communities. This includes working with sports clubs, marae, schools, councils, community organisations, government agencies and youth groups.

We provide direct services to agencies and community groups and use our knowledge in public health to address youth alcohol and drug harms in the Hutt Valley.

Reason for submitting

The illegal market for psychoactive substances is increasingly unpredictable. There are hundreds of new psychoactive substances, which can cause serious harm, especially if the user is unaware of which substance they have. With accessible and comprehensive substance checking services we believe people will be in a better position to make informed decisions that will reduce harm and save lives in the communities we serve. Our emergency services across the Wellington region have all treated patients for unknown substance use.

This submission draws on community experience and addresses public health matters to provide recommendations on areas where the Bill could be enhanced regarding drug and substance checking services.

CAYAD Hutt Valley is supportive of the Drug and Substance Checking Legislation Bill

CAYAD and RPH support the Drug and Substance Checking Legislation Bill as we believe there is sufficient proof that drug checking services like the ones already provided at music festivals and events often positively affect people's behaviour and as such are an important harm reduction service. A recent survey and study from Victoria University found that drug checking is not just about the test itself - the information offered and advice given are important elements of drug checking services. Further, behaviour change should not be measured solely in terms of drug disposals as other behavioural changes are also important e.g. taking less, not mixing substances tested with other drugs or alcohol, as well as improvements in knowledge about harm reduction for service users (Hutton, 2021).

Results from the survey identified the following:

- 68% of those who had used drug checking services like KnowYourStuffNZ (KYSNZ) stated that they had changed their behaviour either through disposing of their substances after checking or through adhering to harm reduction advice.

- 87% of those who had used KYSNZ drug checking services stated that their knowledge of harm reduction had improved a great deal or a little.
- The survey results also found that the majority of participants (95%-97%) supported drug checking, thought that it reduced drug related harm, and supported the proposed change to s12 of the 1975 Misuse of Drugs Act (MODA) to give drug checking legal status legal.

(Hutton, 2021)

Results from the interviews identified the following:

- All of the groups that were interviewed thought that drug checking was an important harm reduction service and that it reduced drug-related harms.
- The interviewees noted that young people will take drugs regardless of their illegal status and that drug checking services were therefore a crucial harm reduction intervention.
- Festival organisers wanted to provide as safe an environment as possible for those attending their events and noted illegality as a barrier to providing drug checking services.
- Festival organisers who invited KYSNZ to their events noted fewer serious incidents related to illicit drug use and emphasised the importance of having drug checking at their events.
- Medical personnel who were interviewed noted the treatment problems that came with festival attendees ingesting unknown substances, and supported drug checking as it enabled clear information about drugs that were circulating at particular events that might be dangerous.

(Hutton, 2021)

A community perspective

With CAYAD Hutt Valley's strong connection to community, it is important for us to share our experience in this space. Through our experiences with our people and bearing witness to the effects of drug harm in the communities we service, we support the Drug and Substance Checking Legislation Bill.

There are a vast range of unpredictable substances that are readily available on the street, where more often than not the user has no true idea of what they're taking. Psychoactive substances known as bath salts, flakka and meow meow are often mis-sold as MDMA or cocaine. This in itself creates a greater risk of harm and chance of overdose. We know through our connection with our people in our communities that these types of substitutes are far less desired and if users are made aware of what the substance is before they take it, they are far more likely to not take the substance.

To add to this, drug checking will help health professionals, community workers and Police detect bad batches of synthetic cathinones and synthetic cannabinoids. This will allow organisations like CAYAD to provide a more comprehensive community service to the Hutt Valley. CAYAD supports a comprehensive and accessible drug checking service to be made readily available to communities and events at their request.

Recommendations

RPH supports the Drug and Substance Checking Legislation Bill as we believe there is sufficient proof that drug checking services like the ones already provided at music festivals and events often positively affect people's behaviour and as such are an important harm reduction service. We would like to see this bill passed through Parliament with royal assent granted as quickly as possible.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Drug and Substance Checking Legislation Bill. RPH wishes to support the Select Committee by offering our public health expertise, knowledge and skills, where appropriate in regards to the above recommendations.

WORKS CITED

Hutton, F. (2021). *Drug Checking at New Zealand Festivals (Final Report)*. Victoria University of Wellington, Te Herenga Waka, Wellington.