‘PARTY DRUG’ OVERDOSES SPARK RENEWED CALLS FOR PILL TESTING
New research shows support from Australian festival goers

(Sydney: Saturday, 29 October 2016) A new study to be presented at the APSAD Scientific Alcohol and Drugs Conference shows overwhelming user support among young people for pill testing services at Australian events, and has led to renewed calls for the introduction of such services by Australian drug researchers.

This follows 16 drug overdoses on the Gold Coast earlier this month, where party goers who thought they were taking the drug MDMA (ecstasy) were hospitalised after hallucinating and becoming incoherent. One man, Victorian footballer Riki Stephens, died as a result.

“Testing drugs and providing the results back to both users and other stakeholders can be a game changer. With this information to hand, police, health and welfare agencies that deal with the fall-out from drugs are better equipped to do their jobs and drug users can avoid ingesting unknown, unexpected and potentially more dangerous substances,” said Dr Monica Barratt, a drug policy researcher at UNSW.

“Drug checking also helps identify latest trends of misrepresentation in illicit drug markets and provides an opportunity to engage users in education and harm reduction,” she said.

In the study of 851 Australians who used illicit psychostimulant and psychedelic substances and attend nightclubs or festivals, 94 per cent said they would use drug-checking services at clubs and festivals, 85 per cent would use a fixed-site service at a central location and 53 per cent would use a laboratory that accepted samples by mail.

Most would only use the service if they received direct feedback rather than having the results of the testing released in aggregate publicly. The possibility of arrest would deter almost all of them from using a service.

“This study shows that voluntary user-submitted drug testing is feasible in Australia under conditions of direct feedback and legal amnesty. The future of drug-checking services here now rests on securing full cooperation between policy makers, law enforcement, harm reduction/consumer groups, and the general public,” said Dr Barratt.

“However there needs to be an understanding that a drug-checking service is not a panacea that will prevent all drug-related overdoses or deaths. The provision of test results opens up conversations with people about their drug use, and this should occur as part of a suite of public safety interventions, like festival outreach, safe spaces, free water, environmental modifications, and ready access to first aid.”

Dr Barratt is presenting her research at the annual summit of the Australasian Professional Society on Alcohol and other Drugs (APSAD), the APSAD 2016 Scientific Alcohol and Drugs Conference, to be held in Sydney from 30 October to 2 November. END

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About APSAD Sydney 2016

The APSAD Scientific Alcohol and Drugs Conference is the southern hemisphere’s largest summit on alcohol and other drugs, attracting leading researchers, clinicians, policy makers and community representatives from across the region. The Australasian Professional Society on Alcohol and other Drugs (APSAD) is Asia Pacific's leading multidisciplinary organisation for professionals involved in the alcohol and other drug field.

- View the APSAD 2016 Conference Program
- Read more about the Australasian Professional Society on Alcohol and other Drugs (APSAD)
- Contact Petrana Lorenz to arrange an interview or find out about other key topics.