



Health

Queensland to become first state to introduce permanent pill-testing clinics

Rabbits Eat Lettuce festival will conduct testing onsite at the end of March and first fixed-site clinic will open in Bowen Hills in April

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Andrew Messenger

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Queensland will establish the first of two fixed pill-testing clinics in Brisbane this year, the first Australian state to back the harm reduction strategy on an ongoing basis.

The Rabbits Eat Lettuce festival near Warwick will be the first to conduct pill testing on site, at the end of the month. In 2019 [two people died after taking drugs at the festival](#).

The health minister, Shannon Fentiman, said nearly \$1m has been allocated over the next years to roll out the service.

“In 2021 there were 2,231 drug-induced deaths in Australia - the equivalent of five deaths a day,” she said on Wednesday.

“That’s 2,231 deaths too many, and we know this number will continue to grow if we don’t act now.”

Queensland has contracted Harm Reduction Australia to deliver “several” festival-based services in 2024 and 2025 after an open market tender process. The government has also engaged the University of Queensland to conduct an evaluation of the services and to develop a statewide monitoring process.

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The first fixed-site clinic will open in Bowen Hills in April. The state government is now deciding where to establish the second one through a co-design process.

The service will be free, voluntary and confidential.

In 2018 the Australian Capital Territory became the first Australia jurisdiction to conduct pill testing, at the [Groovin the Moo festival](#). It established a fixed pill-testing clinic for use by the regular community in 2022 on a pilot basis. But Queensland is the first place to commit to do so on an ongoing basis.

Queensland Injectors Voice for Advocacy and Action chief executive, Emma Kill, said drug checking was a commonsense harm-reduction approach used across the world.

In addition to testing substances including MDMA and cocaine, medics provide advice to drug users, she said.

“It surpasses substance testing; we’re equipping individuals with the means to make informed decisions about their drug use,” she said.

The festival will also feature “sanctuaries” for drug education, support and rest.

Organisers said these spaces were essential components of the model, providing a supportive environment where attendees can seek information or assistance.

“This initiative reflects our commitment to minimising harm and empowering our festival-goers with informed decisions regarding substance use,” said the festival founder, Erik Lamir.

“By offering discreet, legal and medically approved testing, we aim to reduce the risks associated with substances to ensure our community can enjoy the festival’s vibrant offerings with peace of mind.”

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Shift a 'breakthrough moment'

Many civil society groups saw the introduction of pill testing as the first step towards an end to the “war on drugs”.

The ACT decriminalised all drugs in 2022. The laws took effect last year.

Drug Policy Australia’s managing director, Greg Chipp, said the Queensland shift was a “breakthrough moment”.

He said as community acceptance continued to grow the state government should consider expanding testing in community health centres across the state.

“You’ve got a potential drug that people are thinking of consuming; to get it tested it’s just commonsense and prudent,” he said.

In 2019 **the Queensland Productivity Commission** found drug decriminalisation would save the state more than \$165m in prison costs alone.

Last year the state expanded its drug diversion program from cannabis. **This means many people who would have been charged with possession** of drugs such as heroin and methamphetamine will instead be warned or offered a diversionary program. The government predicted that about 17,000 fewer Queenslanders would be prosecuted for drug possession.

“The drug law reform is a continuum,” Chipp said. “And certainly decriminalisation is on that continuum. I would suggest a policy to go a little bit further than decriminalisation, a policy of legal regulation of drugs for adult consumption. That would have to be the endgame.”

The Greens also pushed the government to go further.

The Greens state MP Michael Berkman said it was a “huge win for harm reduction” and would save lives.

“I’d like to see drug checking expanded throughout the community with ongoing government support and funding, especially in Safe Night precincts like the Valley and Surfers Paradise,” he said.

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