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Media Release

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Detection of highly potent opioids in MDMA at festivals prompts emergency warnings and renewed calls for pill testing

The **South Australian Network of Drug and Alcohol Services (SANDAS) Inc)** supports the call by Chris Gough, Chief Executive of the nation's only pill testing service, the Canberra Alliance for Harm Minimisation and Advocacy, who said the detection of nitazenes in pills sold as MDMA showed the need for similar services in other states. SANDAS believes the introduction of drug checking is critical in the approach to the SA festival Season when many people will be partying including those coming from interstate.

Pill testing (also known as drug checking) would provide an important addition to our states long-standing commitment to reducing the harms associated with drug use. It would potentially save lives and reduce the burden on emergency departments. The recent intervention at an NSW event where medical experts at the HTID festival at Olympic Park realised a dangerous synthetic opioid was circulating and acted fast to save lives. Workers from DanceWize programs (who work to keep people safe from drug harms at events), onsite medical experts and the festival organisers were able to warn everyone present about the serious risks of using a contaminated MDMA tablet (a pink tablet stamped with Red Bull logo). Mary Harrod, the Chief Executive of NSW Users and Aids Association, which runs the DanceWize program, said the announcement had saved lives and was a turning point in festival management that should be celebrated (Guardian 31/01/2024).

Michael White, Executive Officer said, 'Following successful trials at Australian music festivals and the implementation of the CanTEST Health and Drug Checking Service model in the ACT, funded by the ACT Department of Health and delivered by an NGO partnership, SANDAS urges the State government to invest in drug checking initiatives to support a balanced and holistic approach to harm reduction as a matter of urgency saving lives and preventing harm'.

Michael also said, 'SANDAS **recommends** that drug checking should become a standard offering at all South Australian music festivals, fixed sites in entertainment precincts, and at mobile sites (metro and rural) and events where illicit drug use is likely to occur'.

'Since 1985, Australia's National Drug Strategy has guided governments' investment in a harm reduction initiatives including needle and syringe programs, peer education, Opioid Replacement Therapy, and medically supervised safe injecting rooms. SANDAS considers pill-testing/drug checking aligns with harm reduction principles in three key ways:

1. by reducing the immediate risk by ensuring that users are made aware of contaminates and approximate doses of active substances in the illicit drugs tested.

2. by expanding opportunities to provide drug awareness and harm reduction education, including the risks associated with polydrug use, to those already planning drug use.

3. by providing an `early warning system' for new dangers and assisting with the real-time collation of data around Australian drug use'.

Michael said, 'The key intent of drug checking is to prevent immediate harm, including injury or loss of life. There are also great long-term harm minimisation benefits to be gained from testing which creates opportunities for skilled alcohol and other drug workers to provide people who intend to use drugs with immediate harm reduction education interventions.'

Michael noted that 'testing creates a number of opportunities to bolster harm reduction approaches by:

- making results of drug checks of substances submitted for testing, seized or associated with medical emergencies available to users immediately, supporting better choices.
- Drug checking has been shown to increase drug users' awareness of drug substitution and contamination in the drugs they have acquired. This information can change their purchasing patterns and over time. Where testing occurs, the drugs presented showed less substitution and contamination, reducing the risk associated with using the drugs.'

Michael noted, 'the most common objection to introducing drug checking is the fear that the practice would increase drug use by normalising drug use and creating the misconception that drug use was risk-free. SANDAS notes that expert evaluations have found there is no evidence to suggest these fears would be realised.'

'Drug checking services have the potential to save lives and reduce drug-related harms, including overdoses, often requiring hospitalisations and sometimes resulting in deaths. Drug checking can provide drug users, treatment services, health providers and police with vital data to enable the delivery of better targeted interventions to reduce the harms of drug use in our community.'

Michael commended the State and Territory Alcohol and Other Drug Peaks Network Position Statement on Drug Checking (including Pill Testing) for a fully referenced discussion of these issues: https://sandas.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/02012020-AOD_PN_PillTesting_DrugChecking_PosPaper_Final.pdf.

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The South Australian Network of Drug and Alcohol Services (SANDAS) works to enhance community wellbeing and reduce the harm associated with alcohol and drug use. We represent the non-government organisations providing treatment, support, early intervention and prevention services to South Australians affected by alcohol and other drugs. We provide independent advocacy and representation, workforce development, networking and policy support for our members.