

Drug checking to reduce overdoses: From crisis to care



A teenager dies after taking what she thought was MDMA — but it wasn't.



A man overdoses alone, unaware his cocaine contained a powerful synthetic opioid.



Over 2000 drug induced deaths occurred in 2022 across Australia*.

Penington report 2024



Social Equity Research Centre researchers

Associate Professor Monica Barratt and
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Project partners

The Loop Australia, Harm Reduction Victoria, and
Students for Sensible Drug Policy

Funding body

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These aren't rare tragedies. They're happening across Australia — and they're preventable.

Across Australia, powerful synthetic drugs — including novel opioids and benzodiazepines never intended for human use — are quietly circulating in illicit pills, powders and capsules.

Ramifications? A growing wave of accidental overdoses and avoidable deaths.

This is the driving force behind this harm minimisation research program led by Associate Professor Monica Barratt: building the evidence, momentum and partnerships needed to introduce **drug checking services** that can save lives.

Drug checking lets people know what's really in their drugs — and talk, without judgment, with health workers about the implications. Around the world, drug checking is a proven harm reduction tool. In Australia, it's only just becoming a reality.

Working alongside community organisations like **The Loop Australia**, **Harm Reduction Victoria**, and **Students for Sensible Drug Policy**, this research flips the script. It starts with people who use drugs — the very group most often left out of conversations that affect them. Their voices helped shape a national feasibility study, a global scan of best practice, and an expert report produced by Associate Professor Barratt from the Social Equity Research Centre for the Coroners Court of Victoria.

The impact? In 2021, the Coroner made history, recommending that Victoria implement drug checking — a call repeated six times since. By June 2024, the Victorian Government had committed: services would launch at festivals and through a fixed and at a centrally located site in Melbourne.

Since then, over

1,300

samples have been tested, and

700+

health conversations held — each one a chance to reduce harm and challenge stigma.

Backed by a new **National Health and Medical Research Council Investigator Grant**, this five-year program will continue to ask bold questions: How can we design drug checking services that work — not just in theory, but in practice, for everyone?

Because when evidence, policy and lived experience come together, we don't just reduce overdoses. We rewrite the rules on care.

Penington report 2024 — <https://www.penington.org.au/australias-annual-overdose-report-2024/>

“Monica's work in this space is not only world-leading, it's grounded, practical, and has made a real difference to how we deliver harm reduction on the ground.”

Cameron Francis, CEO, The Loop Australia

