



news release

from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon

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Report echoes growing concern over pills sold as 'ecstasy'...

FOCUS ON PILL TESTING IN DANCE AND MUSIC SCENE

Growing concern all over Europe about what makes up pills sold as ecstasy is highlighted in a report out today from the **Lisbon-based EU drugs agency, the EMCDDA**. It says that sometimes pills contain other harmful substances like PMA and 4MTA (see *Notes*). This is rare, but can be deadly.

The report – *An inventory of on-site pill-testing interventions in the European Union* – analyses on-the-spot pill testing: not by the 'authorities' but by groups in touch with the music and dance scene. Such groups work, not by 'moralising' or being judgmental, but by giving instant analyses of pills' chemical content and other useful information, enabling users to weigh up the risks themselves.

The agency has written a rough guide to some key findings aimed at the youth media. This is available on its website at:

http://www.emcdda.org/infopoint/news_media/special_features.shtml

'Many still think ecstasy fairly safe'

The report says pill testing in clubs and at dance events is still in its infancy. But there are special projects in **Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland**. One – the Vienna-based *ChEckiT!* <http://www.checkyourdrugs.at> – was commissioned to undertake this study for the **EMCDDA**.

Such groups – some of which have emerged from the techno-scene – pride themselves on connecting with the young people they're trying to help.

The report says many users 'still think ecstasy is fairly safe'. On-the-spot pill testing is one of the few ways in which groups can connect with people in this scene and tell them in their own language that what they're buying, and the amount they're taking, might not be as safe as they think.

The report adds that most people *do* care about their health, although this doesn't stop them using drugs. It puts it like this: 'After all, if you're buying ecstasy you want to be sure it *is* ecstasy.' However, pill testing is not about checking quality – making sure it's good stuff – but rather about helping people avoid the 'bad stuff' and think about the consequences of drug use.

The report warns that pill testing mustn't be used as a 'bait' to attract people to 'don't-do-drugs' propaganda. It has to be seen as an end in itself – protecting people's health, even lives.

What about the police?

The report admits the legal side of pill testing can be a minefield. But everyone involved is absolutely clear that no information whatsoever on those who hand over pills for testing is given to the police. However, the report stresses that minimum political backing and good links with the local police are vital to success.

One key conclusion is that, although there is no strict scientific proof that on-the-spot pill testing cuts drug use, equally there is no evidence to show it promotes it – or that it is exploited by drug dealers.

Pill testing often takes only 10–15 minutes. A **Spanish** group (*Energy Control, Barcelona* <http://www.abs-ong.org/energycontrol>) involved in this work reported as many as 75 pills tested at one rave. The average age of those who ask for a pill test is 22, with three men for every woman.

The report says that, 10 years after the start of the youth music scene, of which ecstasy is such a key part, authorities throughout Europe are still wondering how to respond 'in a reasonable and adequate manner'.

The groups mentioned in the report are trying their best to take a lead in defining the needs and problems of the music and dance scene and 'by providing pleasant and healthy spaces within techno events, clubs or festivals'. They also use the language of the scene to put over key risk-reduction messages.

Other activities by such groups include giving out condoms, fruit or drinking water. The report says steps to care for people on the scene and possibilities for alternative activities to drugs 'seem unlimited'. Just two examples it quotes as in use: massage and so-called 'brain machines', which stimulate your sight and hearing to alter your perception of the world *without* taking mind-altering drugs.

Pill-testing research vital for policy-making

The drugs agency says pill testing by those close to the youth culture scene is important in reaching users and others who, not surprisingly, don't pay much attention to 'anti-drug' messages – and in boosting their awareness of risks and how to reduce them.

The agency calls for more research and evaluation into on-the-spot pill testing. This, it adds, is vital in coming up with policies to deal with drug use in recreational settings.

Notes:

EMCDDA pill-testing project:

http://www.emcdda.org/responses/themes/outreach_pilltesting.shtml

Pill testing report, executive summary:

http://www.emcdda.org/multimedia/project_reports/responses/on-site_pill_testing_sum.pdf

Pill-testing report, full version:

http://www.emcdda.org/multimedia/project_reports/responses/pill_testing_report.pdf

Fact files of pill-testing projects in the EU:

http://www.emcdda.org/multimedia/project_reports/responses/pill_testing_fact_files.pdf

4-MTA (4-methylthioamphetamine):

http://www.emcdda.org/multimedia/press_releases/1999/pr07_990915_4-MTA.pdf

PMA (para-methoxyamphetamine):

http://www.emcdda.org/multimedia/publications/DrugNet/29_31/dn_30_en.pdf

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