

PILL-TESTING SERVICE

Statement

HON SOPHIA MOERMOND (South West) [6.32 pm]: Tonight, I want to talk about pill testing as a safeguard. Recently, there was an article in the newspaper about pill testing not being implemented by this government, including at Bunbury's Groovin the Moo, which has unfortunately been cancelled. What a shame that is. Today, I spoke about diet pills laced with methamphetamine in the Australian Capital Territory where there is a test centre, and it found out that there was indeed meth in those pills. Those pills were given to a child, by the way. The only solution offered to that was the advice to not buy supplements from the internet, which is not very workable.

It is a shame that our government's view around this remains rigid and that it does not necessarily view its obligation as providing safeguards and harm-reduction measures beyond simple prohibition and providing limited education. If prohibition were effective, we would not have seen a recent spike in drug overdoses and deaths due to illicit substances. We also would not have seen the massive increase in metabolites in sewage water. It has been well documented that prohibition does not work. We can see this with alcohol consumption, teenage pregnancies and the continued use of illicit substances. One of the reasons that prohibition does not work is that alcohol, sex and drugs are thought to be fun. Members may agree with that, or not, and it is absolutely their right to have that opinion, but it is going to be very hard to legislate against fun.

I am not advocating on behalf of people who use illicit substances, but it is an absolutely realistic point of view that people will use them, especially at music festivals. Apart from the benefits of pill testing to the individual, there are also benefits for the community. If someone suffers a drug overdose or a negative reaction of some sort, that flows over into their family and their community and puts extra pressure on our healthcare system. Young people sometimes do risky things. Their brains do not mature until the age of 25. People can do all sorts of things from the age of 18 onwards, so that is possibly seven years of partying without full critical-thinking abilities, and it is known that they do not always make the best decisions for themselves, or for others for that matter. These people also deserve protection and for the law to work for them too.

It is interesting to note that policing with sniffer dogs shows there has been an increase in risky behaviours when one would think it would be the opposite. A recent survey found that if a festival attendee is aware of a police presence as they come onto the festival property, 30 per cent choose to hide the substance in their body, which poses a risk of something lodging in their body and also the protective covering breaking, which can lead to unregulated absorption and possibly a much higher dose than they had wanted to take. Of the people who are approached by police sniffer dogs, 70 per cent decide to take their whole stash in one go. Once again, that leads to a higher risk of overdosing. Both these behaviours are driven by panic and the fear of being caught by the police. This fear of being caught also leads to people waiting too long to seek help for a suspected overdose. A definite stigma is still associated with that.

There is low-level evidence that pill testing appears to reduce the cutting in of other substances with poor safety profiles. We are looking specifically at fentanyl here, but also some of the newer opioids that are being developed and finding their way into MDMA or ecstasy in particular, and methamphetamines as well. The problem with those new drugs is that the ambulance people may not know how to deal with them; we do not necessarily have the antidotes for them and a small amount can be much stronger and have a greater negative effect on a person.

In the Netherlands and Portugal where pill testing is seen as a commonsense strategy, it was found that the drug dealers actually sold better quality product after that strategy was implemented, which I thought was interesting—an unexpected side effect. That basically happens because if a person gets something tested and finds out that it is not what their drug dealer told them it was, apparently that is bad for business.

It would be interesting to see whether there is a financial benefit to pill testing and whether that would safeguard our young people further. It is a shame that we need to have financial validation for those sorts of things. This is a harm-reduction intervention, not an intervention to legitimise the use of these substances. I just want people to be safe.