Keeping the kids safe: Australia's first pill testing trial

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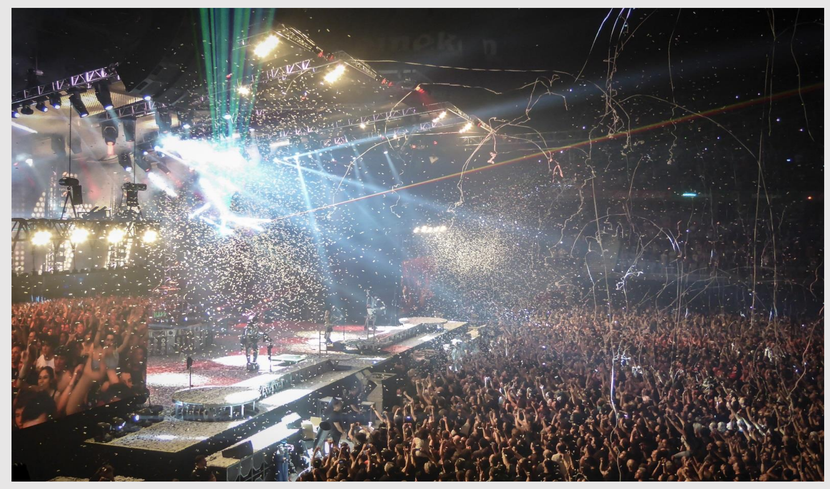

INTRODUCTION

Pill testing has not previously been supported in Australia.

We describe the ACT Government-led process leading to an evidence-based pill testing service being piloted at a single day music festival.

PROCESS

A proposal for pill testing was submitted by an expert harm reduction consortium.

A literature review and consultation with technical experts, non-government and political stakeholders identified several key issues across four themes: public health, legal, law enforcement and reputational risk (Figure 1).

These issues were considered by a cross-government working group, led by the Health Directorate, and including justice, ambulance and police representatives. Community support was tested by a telephone survey.

Public Health

- Illicit drug use is common at music festivals
- A substantial proportion of tested illicit drug results are unexpected
- An unexpected result significantly increases the chance that the tested drug will not be taken
- Provides opportunity to engage patrons with health information and influence immediate behaviour
- Cannot certify 'no adverse reaction' will occur
- Data informs emerging risks, e.g. new toxic substances

Law enforcement

- Potential for targeting of people accessing pill testing
- Risk of prosecution of pill testing staff/volunteers

Reputational risk

- All stakeholders: Government, event organisers, land owners
- Harm from pills even if pill testing is available
- Perception pill testing certifies a substance as 'safe'
- Perceived implicit acceptance of illegal drug use
- Perceived failure of aggressive law enforcement

Legal liability

- Barrier to direct provision of pill testing by government

Figure 1. Key Issues

MODEL

The final model centred on an enabling policy environment which supported delivery of the pilot by a third party organisation within the defined music festival.

The pill testing service was located within the festival health precinct. The health precinct location was an integral component of the operational plan.

Strong and consistent public health messaging addressed sensitivities and concerns on reputational risk.

Pill testing service requirements:

- trained staff
- appropriate pill testing equipment
- amnesty bin for safe disposal of drugs
- provision of information on risks of drug taking and limitations of pill testing to all patrons
- waiver to be initialled by patrons
- provision of testing results to first aid providers
- evaluation

DISCUSSION

The factors responsible for success can be presented using Moore's strategic triangle for generating public value[1] (Figure 2).

A critical success factor was the framing of pill testing as a harm-reducing health intervention.

The time required to undertake the literature search, assess community views, gain government and stakeholder support and implement operational components should not to be under-estimated.

An independent evaluation is recommended in future.

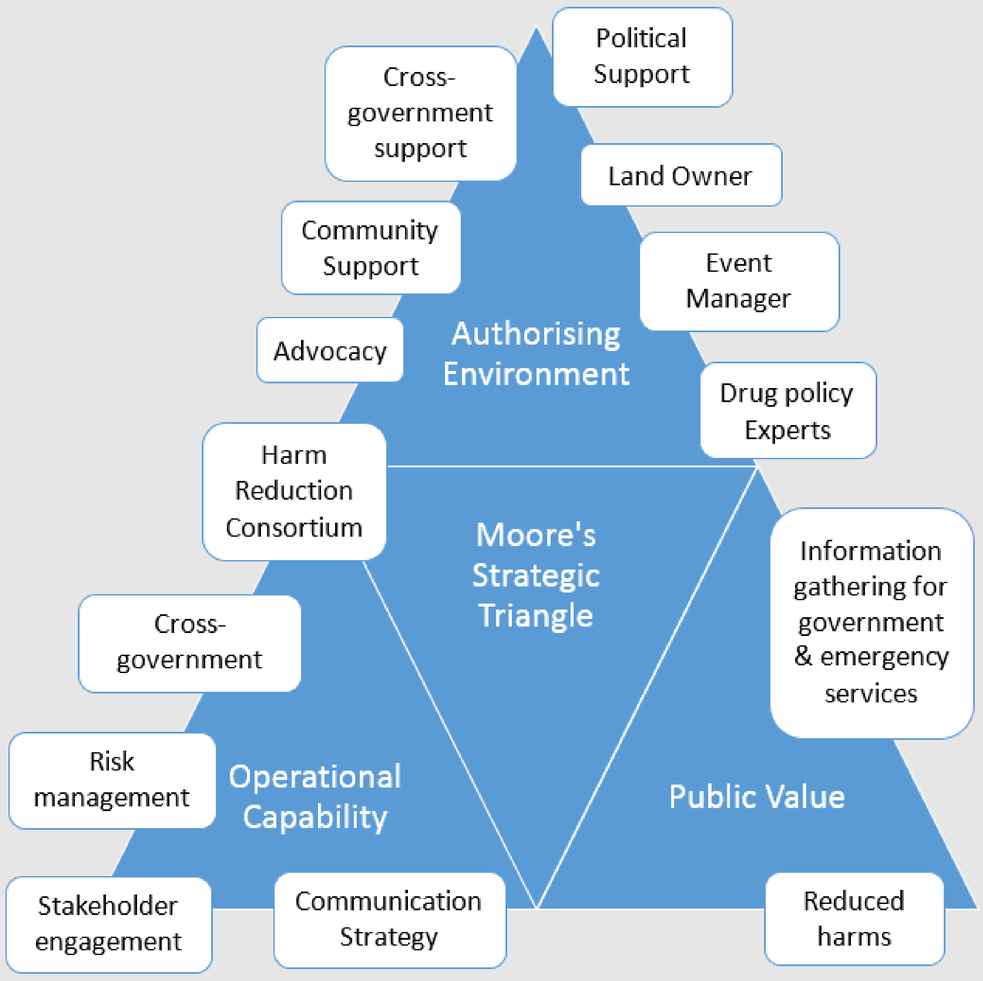

Figure 2. Moore's strategic triangle for generating public value[1]

CONCLUSION

This pilot has fundamentally changed the harm reduction policy conversation in Australia, but it remains to be seen if this will lead to pill testing becoming standard practice at music festivals in the ACT and nationally.

References

[1] Moore MH. Creating Public Value. Strategic Management in Government. Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard University Press (1997)

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