

Donald MacPherson: Preventing music-festival drug deaths must go beyond saying 'just say no'



[Donald MacPherson, National Post](#) | August 20, 2014 6:45 AM ET
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AP Photo/The Omaha World-Herald/Chris Machian In Austria, workers attend large music events and offer professional drug testing for purity — with results within 30 minutes. Why couldn't we do the same here in Canada?

It's summertime, so we can count on this unfortunate fact: Young Canadians will die or become seriously ill because of drug use at music festivals. Earlier this month, three deaths and dozens of cases of illness were attributed to drugs at the VELD festival in Ontario and Boonstock in BC. And the resurgence of large-scale, camp-out music events — especially EDM (electronic dance music) festivals — means these incidents will only become more common.

['People were picking pills on the ground': Toronto police searching for drug samples after Veld deaths](#)

Toronto police have identified two drugs that likely led to two deaths and 13 illnesses over the weekend at the Veld Music Festival, but say they are so far unable to classify the exact nature of these substances.

Det. Sgt. Peter Trimble of the homicide squad said Tuesday at a press conference that one person has answered the police's call to turn in drugs purchased during the event.

The two-day concert was held Saturday and Sunday at Downsview Park, with performers including Dutch DJ Armin van Buuren, Scottish DJ Calvin Harris and Australian hip-hop performer Iggy Azalea.

The conventional response to these tragedies is predictable and ineffective. We tend to blame the individuals for making bad choices and trumpet the "just say no to drugs" mantra.

But there's a better way. For starters, we need to acknowledge that drug use is not going away. Which isn't to say we should condone it or encourage it. However, it's naïve to think that we can eliminate drug use at music festivals, or anywhere, for that matter.

So let's make it safer. The world is full of instructive solutions to the problems we face: Canadian youth are not unique in supplementing their partying with psychoactive substances. In the Netherlands, Switzerland, Portugal, Colombia, Spain and Austria, authorities have developed "safer parties" strategies to help concert-goers determine if the pills they are about to ingest are as advertised.

In Austria, for example, ChEckiT project workers attend large music events and offer professional drug testing for purity and accurate labelling, which provides results within 30 minutes. It's part of an integrated drug-checking service that includes information, individual counselling, crisis intervention, group discussions, telephone hotlines, and educational videos on drug-related themes. Colombian NGO Accion Tecnica Social has initiated a similar program in that country.

Other countries provide continuously available street-level testing facilities. One example is the Dutch Ministry of Health's Drug Information Monitoring System (DIMS), which began in 1988 with testing ecstasy at raves. Today, people can drop off their substances for analysis at a DIMS office, and then check on the internet a couple of days later for results. This system also gives authorities a real-time assessment of drug market trends, enabling general warnings to the community at large when warranted. Here in Canada, only police seizures and hospital visits give us that data, at which point it's usually too late.

None of these programs serve to endorse drug use. But they do send clear messages to young people that society actually cares about their wellbeing. Their fate doesn't need to be conceded to the vagaries of an unregulated, potentially unsafe black market.

Unfortunately, we don't send these messages in Canada. Beyond broad platitudes about education and awareness, the concrete measures taken are primarily reactive rather than preventative. Public officials and police will wring their hands, warn people not to take drugs and perhaps step up attempts to go after the dealers. Event promoters will increase screening at the gate, bring in more emergency responders, and establish "chill-out tents" for those who need a break.

All of which is perfectly worthwhile and laudable, but in the meantime, young people will die because no one in authority is willing to consider product safety as a potential solution to music festival deaths.

Product testing isn't complicated. It wouldn't require any major legislation overhaul, and public-health workers could partner with existing grassroots organizations active in the space to carry it out. For example, the Toronto Raver Information Project (TRIP) already provides info and supplies around safer drug use for the perpetual cohort of partyers for whom simply "saying no" is not a realistic goal. ANKORS does similar work — including some rudimentary product testing — at B.C.'s Shambhala festival. Outside of the events themselves, police could more regularly disclose Health Canada results of the contents of substances seized at raves. Currently, they only do so in exceptional circumstances when it suits their purposes.

Whatever the test results, however, we know from constant warnings of police and others that no drug is made safer when left in the hands of organized criminals and unregulated dealers. So as part of a product-safety regimen, we should also open a discussion about alternatives to across-the-board prohibition, like experimenting with a legal regulated market for party drugs — as New Zealand has done.

Product testing and drug policy experimentation isn't the same as creating a free-for-all where all drugs are available in any corner store for whoever wants them. Nor would it minimize the importance of health information and drug education and awareness programs — similar to how we approach tobacco and our favourite party drug, alcohol.

It is simply the recognition that we have the power and knowledge to prevent unnecessary deaths at music festivals and anywhere else drugs are taken. What is holding us back?

National Post

Donald MacPherson is executive director of the Canadian Drug Policy Coalition.