

## Media Release

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### **THIRD-YEAR REPORT SHOWS RISING DRUG PURITY AND REDUCED SUBSTITUTION AS CANBERRA DRUG CHECKING SERVICE STRENGTHENS GLOBAL MONITORING**

Australia's first fixed-site drug checking service, CanTEST Health and Drug Checking Service, continues to demonstrate the growing public-health value of drug checking, contributing critical early warning data to local, national and international responses to emerging drug risks.

A new report shows that in its third year (21 July 2024-20 July 2025), CanTEST tested 2,072 samples. Now in its fourth year, CanTEST has tested over 6,000 samples, from July 2022 to December 2025. In addition to test results, CanTEST has delivered thousands of health and harm-reduction interventions to the Canberra community and beyond. These interventions help empower community with critical and timely information about drugs in circulation, and strategies to reduce harm.

The report identifies several significant market shifts in year three, including increased median purity of MDMA, methamphetamine and heroin, a decrease in substitution and adulteration across MDMA, cocaine, ketamine and methamphetamine. MDMA median purity increased from 69% in year two to 76% in year three (% is free base equivalent / theoretical maximum for MDMA in HCl form is 84%).

In January 2025, CanTEST introduced a new method for identifying novel benzodiazepines, expanding its analytical capacity and coinciding with an increase in benzodiazepine-related samples presented for testing. Substituted Benzodiazepines reviewed by CanTEST in year 3 have increasingly featured counterfeit branding and convincing packaging, including labelled bottles, blister packs and pill-presses mimicking real brands (such as Pfizer's Xanax bars).

#### **Global impact: from Canberra to the United Nations**

Drug checking services are increasingly recognised internationally as a vital source of real-time data on the unregulated drug market. In its third year (Sep 2024), CanTEST detected potent synthetic opioid N-pyrrolidino isotonitazene (NPI) for the first time globally. The discovery led to a peer-reviewed publication in May 2025, and the substance is now on the agenda for international scheduling discussions by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) at Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) in March this year.

These findings underscore the role of drug checking in providing real-time surveillance data that supports clinicians, policymakers, and international agencies responding to the rapidly evolving drug market, and its associated harms.

#### **Growing demand highlights need for expansion**

The report also shows the strong community demand for the service.

CanTEST operates for just six hours each week: Thursdays from 3-6pm and Fridays from 6-9pm. Service hours are extended when increased demand is anticipated, such as when there are major music festivals in the ACT or nearby jurisdictions, and the service is closed on public holidays. In its third year, this meant CanTEST was open for approximately 300 hours and still tested 2072 samples: an average of around seven samples per hour of operation.

During this time the service delivered:

- 2,371 health and alcohol & other drug interventions
- 73% of clients engaged in harm-reduction conversations

- 72% of new clients had never previously accessed a healthcare worker for drug advice

CanTEST issued more than 50 public drug alerts in its first three years, including over 30 in year three alone, warning the community about dangerous and unexpected substances and informing health services of emerging risks.

### **Fixed-site services complement festival drug checking**

The findings of this report come ahead of the release of the NSW drug checking trial report and highlight the importance of fixed-site services as a complement to mobile and festival-based models.

Fixed-site services:

- Provide year-round monitoring of the drug market
- Offer access to people who do not attend festivals
- Enable the opportunity for deeper health engagement and referrals. Limited operating hours under current funding arrangements mean the service often struggles to meet demand and cannot reach everyone who could benefit.

### **Quotes**

"Drug checking and the delivery of harm reduction information saves lives. By giving people clear, evidence-based information about what's actually in the substances they're using, CanTEST helps individuals make safer decisions. Importantly, the service reaches people who have never spoken to a healthcare professional about their drug use before, creating valuable opportunities for early intervention, brief support and connection to broader health services."

**Stephanie Stephens, Chief Operating Officer, Directions Health Services**

"CanTEST has proven to be a highly effective service that engages community members in talking about drugs in relation to their health and wellbeing. Of the people engaging with CanTEST over the last 3 years, 70% had never talked to a health professional about drug use before. This makes CanTEST a pivotal intervention in preventing drug related harm and ensuring the safety of our community."

**Chris Gough, Executive Director, Canberra Alliance for Harm Minimisation & Advocacy**

"The demand for CanTEST shows how much the community values accessible, confidential health services. The ACT's mixed-model approach, with fixed-site and festival outreach, reaches different populations. Expanding access would allow us to reach more people and strengthen Australia's early warning systems. We hope more jurisdictions follow the ACT's lead."

**Stephanie Tzanetis, Executive Officer, Pill Testing Australia**

"The detection of new substances like NPI and isotocyanzene demonstrates how quickly the drug market is changing. Without services like CanTEST, these substances may go undetected until significant harm occurs."

**Professor Malcolm McLeod, CanTEST Chemistry Lead, ANU Research School of Chemistry**