Just say no is a no go

"Just say no" has never been successful. It goes against the evidence and should now be trashed in favour of a more sensible and enlightened drug strategy. Harm reduction continues to be the most effective way to minimise the transmission of hepatitis C and the harms associated with other drug use.

March 11, 2016 By David Pieper

"Just Say No" was a slogan created and championed by First Lady, Nancy Reagan, during her husband's presidency in the 1980s. It aimed to discourage children from engaging in illegal recreational drug use by offering various ways of saying no.

While Nancy Reagan died this week, the "War on Drugs", of which this was a part, has been responsible for the deaths of thousands of people from HIV and hepatitis C since the 1970s. It spread fear and ignorance instead of information, not just in the US but in other countries, including Australia, which was pressured into following the crusade.

Estimates of the size of the US's illicit drug trade suggest that users spend in the order of $100 billion annually, sustaining and enriching large criminal organisations inside and outside the country. The United Nation's 2014 World Drug Report confirms Australia as leading the world in the use of party drug ecstasy. In short, the "War on Drugs" and "Just say no" have been complete failures.

Evidence-based policies emphasising harm minimisation, drug treatment, and the decriminalisation of cannabis for personal use are recognised as the approaches most likely to minimise the harmful, addictive effects of illicit drugs. But in government and law enforcement circles, including in Australia, attitudes to drug law reform remain hostile.

Ecstasy, or MDMA, is the drug of choice for party and concert-goers. Pill-testing stations have become an almost routine feature of European music festivals, allowing patrons to test the purity of ecstasy tablets. A National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre report in 2010 estimated that ecstasy was involved in nearly 100 deaths in Australia between 2000 and 2008, yet authorities are still hostile toward towards the concept of drug-checking laboratories at music festivals.

Music festivals and concerts now feature big police contingents, complete with drug sniffer dogs, but the overall effectiveness of a this police presence is questionable. Festival-goers will swallow all their pills at once if there is any chance they will be confiscated, which creates its own problems. The dogs are an unwelcome intrusion used to justify stop and search, despite the fact

that they are wrong a third of the time.

Allowing festival-goers to test their pills for potency or to determine whether they have been contaminated with toxic chemicals is a just common sense. Buyers of ecstasy tablets on the black market have no way of knowing the potency or purity of their pruchase. But nobody is going to consume a pill after they are told it is contaminated. And no dealer will risk their reputation by selling stuff that has been identified as poison. Word spreads very quickly.

Drug-testing laboratories would save lives and by educating young people about the prevalence of tainted drugs, and provide an opportunity to educate them about safer drug use. Medical professionals are prepared to help run a trial. However the authorities remain opposed to pill testing, rejecting the safety objectives and suggesting that festival-goers abstain from drug-taking to ensure their safety.

The failure to endorse pill testing is depressing, and Police insistence on prohibition is self-serving and dishonest – if they were doing their jobs properly, ecstasy would be unavailable on the streets.

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