



National Drug Checking Working Group

Summary of In-person Meeting

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Edmonton, Alberta

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Meeting Participants

In person

- Julie-Soleil Meeson, Elixir, Quebec
- Chloe Sage, ANKORS, British Columbia
- Emily Grant, ANKORS, British Columbia
- Jared Evans, ANKORS, British Columbia
- Bruce Wallace, Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research, British Columbia
- Flora Pagan, Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research, British Columbia
- Lynne Leonard, University of Ottawa, Ontario
- Candace Lepage, University of Ottawa, Ontario
- Pascale Leclerc, Santé Montréal, Quebec
- Ian Garber, British Columbia Centre on Substance Use, British Columbia
- Karen McCrae, British Columbia Centre on Substance Use, British Columbia
- Jaime Arredondo, British Columbia Centre on Substance Use, British Columbia

- Nazlee Maghsoudi, Centre on Drug Policy Evaluation, Ontario
- Tara Marie Watson, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Ontario
- Sandhia Vadlamudy, Cactus, Quebec
- Martin Page, Dopamine, Quebec
- Jarred Aasen, Lantern Services, British Columbia
- Lori Kufner, TRIPI!, Ontario
- Doris Payer, Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, Ontario
- Matthew Young, Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, Ontario
- Alice Reis, Girls in Green, Brazil

Via Skype

- Bridget Hall, Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, Ontario
- Caleb Chepesiuk, Sandy Hill SCS, Ontario
- Karen McDonald, Centre on Drug Policy Evaluation, Ontario



Background

After decades of grassroots drug checking in the dance and festival scenes, drug checking is increasingly being pursued as a necessary response to the emergency around illicit drug overdoses that is impacting thousands of Canadians.

The National Drug Checking Working Group originated in June 2015 after the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA) hosted a meeting in Vancouver on [Preventing Drug- and Alcohol-related Harms at Music Festivals in Canada](#) aimed at fostering a national discussion among stakeholders. This meeting connected a number of harm-reduction groups. An important recommendation that arose from the meeting was further investigation of and conversation around the impact of drug-checking services.

Following the meeting, those offering or interested in offering drug-checking services began to meet informally, and after a time the provincial government of British Columbia took on a secretariat role in organizing the group. In September 2017, CCSA was asked by the group to take on the secretariat function given its role as a national convener and its history with the project.

Meeting Summary

In October 2018 in Edmonton, Alberta, as part the conference, Stimulus 2018: Drugs, Policy and Practice in Canada, the National Drug Checking Working Group held its second in-person meeting. The meeting was chaired by Julie-Soleil Meeson of Elixir and brought together twenty-four individuals to present and discuss active and emerging projects in the country and how to move forward. The purpose of this summary is to inform those conducting drug-checking services in Canada and internationally about the existence of this group and what information was shared at this meeting.

ANKORS

Perhaps the most well-known, well-established and well-respected drug-checking program in Canada is provided by ANKORS annually at the Shambhala Music Festival in the British Columbia interior. This year was the sixteenth year of operation and what started as a small, grassroots service by and for festival goers has expanded in so many ways in the last two years.

In collaboration with several organizations based in British Columbia, for the first time the ANKORS drug-checking tent was equipped with four fourier-transform infrared (FTIR) spectrometers plus a Raman spectrometer and fentanyl test strips. Over fifty volunteers were trained to staff the tent sixteen hours a day and provide thousands of checks. ANKORS is collaborating with the B.C. Interior Health Authority, Health Canada's Drug Analysis Service (DAS labs) and the B.C. Centre for Substance Use Research to also conduct confirmatory testing to build on the research articles published from the research in 2017.

The message from ANKORS confirms how critical peers are to the service and the movement. Who is a peer, who is a service provider? People who access the service and people who provide the service both see the service as theirs and these labels are not distinct. After over a decade of not being noticed there is now increasing attention and collaboration, as well as interests in expanding this annual festival-based service into the greater community. As this happens, we need to remember that everyone is equally valuable but not more valuable than others and continue to ask, "Who's voice is missing at the table?"



British Columbia Centre for Substance Use Research

The B.C. Centre for Substance Use Research, with funding from Health Canada's Substance Use and Addiction Program (SUAP), began conducting drug checking at Insite, the supervised drug consumption site in Vancouver in 2017, using a FTIR spectrometer with fentanyl test strips as a response to fentanyl and opioid overdose. The project has been expanding to other sanctioned consumption sites and events both in Vancouver and across the province.

An evidence review was initially conducted to inform the selection of a technology that could balance speed, ease of operation, affordability, rigor and accuracy. The project is now the first provincial drug-checking program in Canada with over 3,000 checks completed and initial results published. The project continues to address challenges related to detecting fentanyl with FTIR technology and exploring ways to expand to community sites.

University of Victoria

At the University of Victoria, a drug-checking pilot project is being initiated with support from Health Canada's SUAP and the Vancouver Foundation. The project is comparing and evaluating the utility of several potential instruments and technologies including the FTIR, a portable gas chromatography-mass spectrometer (GC-MS), a Raman spectrometer and a Raman with surface enhanced Raman spectroscopy (SERS), along with fentanyl test strips.

The three-year project will pilot and evaluate drug checking in community settings to assess the limitations and benefits of the instruments and the practices as a response to the current overdose emergency and how the services could potentially be scaled-up as harm reduction responses informed by health equity and social justice principles. People accessing the services will be asked what works for whom in what settings as they evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of drug checking in the context of current drug policy and stigma about substance use.

STS Pain Pharmacy

Also in Victoria, B.C., STS Pain Pharmacy is seeking to improve health outcomes of people with substance use issues and homelessness, which has included pioneering a Section 56 exemption for drug-checking activities under the federal *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act*.

The process has been new and complicated, and lessons learned were shared on specifics such as site security, substance disposal, staffing, floor plans, protocols and more. Throughout, the process was described as "navigating the grey" that requires both patience and collaboration with others as these processes are adapted to new requests for services in new settings. The service, named Lantern Service, is structured to be inviting, low barrier and stigma free with connections to the community to allow for referrals to local resources as needed.

University of Ottawa and Sandy Hill Community Health Centre

In Ottawa, a three-year research project has been initiated with the University of Ottawa and the federally sanctioned supervised injection site run by the Oasis program at the Sandy Hill Community Health Centre with funding from Canadian Institutes of Health Research. The project seeks to evaluate the feasibility and acceptability of drug checking using a portable mass spectrometer with rapid on-site results. Started in the spring of 2018, the project to date had 200 samples tested and reported that samples are rarely what clients believed. The project is moving forward with summary advisories and exploring the potential to calibrate instrument to provide quantitative results.



Centre on Drug Policy Evaluation

In Toronto, the Centre on Drug Policy Evaluation has funding from Health Canada's SUAP to initiate a multi-site drug-checking network in collaboration with frontline harm reduction agencies and two hospital laboratories. The project has been securing Section 56 exemption, research ethics approvals and legal agreements between partners. When operational, drug samples will be collected at harm reduction sites and transported to hospital labs for checking, and results will be sent back to harm reduction sites to share with clients. Aggregated results will be publicly reported on a weekly or bi-weekly basis.

The challenges and opportunities presented include striking the optimal balance between meeting the needs of clients and evaluating the new service, as well as the benefits of a community advisory board and an iterative approach to implementation that strives to identify best practices moving forward.

Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction

CCSA presented on the Canadian Community Epidemiology Network on Drug Use (CCENDU), which is a national initiative. CCENDU is a national sentinel surveillance network coordinated by CCSA to which representatives from across the country belong. Each representative collects quantitative and qualitative information on drug harms from local data sources (e.g., poison control centres, coroners) and reports from people who use drugs and those directly working with them (e.g., law enforcement, harm reduction). CCENDU then collates this information and assesses the risk at the national level. If warranted, CCENDU issues alerts (in English and French) to advise first responders, healthcare practitioners, treatment providers, people who use drugs, law enforcement and others about drug-related health threats and what can be done to prevent and reduce harms.

Given the new organizations and new resources in drug checking in Canada, the group discussed how a CCENDU bulletin providing an overview of the results from drug-checking services in Canada might be a valuable resource to those working to reduce the harms of substance use in Canada.

Concluding Remarks

In discussion of the evolution and potential expansion of drug checking in the context of the overdose crisis in Canada, the national working group confirmed the value of continued information sharing while acknowledging that the existing network could be enhanced and the need for collaboration and information sharing has been intensified. Information sharing could benefit the development of protocols and best practices, as well as reduce redundancies in projects through such means as the sharing of manuals and data collection instruments.

Moving forward, the working group reached consensus on the following points:

- The increase in drug checking as research provides the potential for increased data sharing and open source platforms.
- As a national working group and as individual projects, there was a shared commitment to expanded collaboration and the sharing of information and data as drug-checking projects responded to risks and harms associated with drug prohibition.
- The group is considering holding their next in-person meeting either before or after CCSA's Issues of Substance conference in Ottawa on November 25–27, 2019.



Canadian Centre
on Substance Use
and Addiction

CCSA was created by Parliament to provide national leadership to address substance use in Canada. A trusted counsel, we provide national guidance to decision makers by harnessing the power of research, curating knowledge and bringing together diverse perspectives.

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