

## PILL TESTING KITS

8 May 2008

**The Hon. D.G.E. HOOD:** Ecstasy has been linked in a number of studies to brain damage, psychotic episodes and increased blood pressure, amongst other conditions. Despite data that makes plain that pill testing kits only encourage people to experiment with such drugs, one so-called drug expert has now suggested in today's media that these kits be made legal. Thankfully, on 2 December 2005, via a media release in her capacity as the then minister for mental health and substance abuse, the Hon. Carmel Zollo said:

*To expect the government to endorse pill testing, and in doing so endorse illicit drugtaking, is unrealistic both legally and morally. The government has a duty of care to all South Australians and would no doubt be held liable if we endorsed these tests and mental illnesses developed in the future. These testing kits, which are universally seen as unreliable and inaccurate, are not the answer. The simple way for people to avoid any risk is not to take illicit drugs.*

It goes without saying that Family First endorses the comments of the Hon. Carmel Zollo. My question is: in light of the supporting evidence, and the comments of the previous Labor minister, is she willing to categorically rule out the legalisation of these so-called pill testing kits?

**The Hon. G.E. GAGO (Minister for Environment and Conservation, Minister for Mental Health and Substance Abuse, Minister Assisting the Minister for Health):** I thank the honourable member for his important question. The government does not endorse the development or use of drug testing kits or the testing of drugs at youth-oriented events, rave parties and so on.

The government has a duty of care to young people attending rave parties as well as to the broader community, and it is essential that our message is clear and unambiguous. The government is committed to preventing the take-up of

illicit drug use, reducing the harmful effects of licit and illicit drugs and offering pathways out of harmful drug use through the provision of appropriate intervention, treatment and rehabilitation services. There is no evidence that testing leads to any net reduction in the harm caused by illicit drugs.

The Ministerial Council on Drug Strategies reviewed the evidence on commercial pill testing and has publicly stated that it does not intend to support commercial testing at youth-oriented events, rave parties, etc. Commercially available pill testing kits are currently being used in an attempt to test the content of pills. However, this raises a number of concerns, the first being the reliability and accuracy of the kit, which we know is questionable.

My understanding is that the kits do not necessarily identify the most toxic, harmful or abundant substances or contaminants contained in tablets, and they are not able to detect more than one substance in a single analysis.

Also, the kits may provide a false sense of security to the user if they interpret the test results as conclusive; they may think that the pill is, in fact, 'safe'.

This testing does not provide any assurance about the effect of the substance taken because, obviously, people react differently to different drugs under different circumstances, for instance, whether they have eaten and how full their stomach is, and whether they have consumed alcohol; and a range of other things affect the way drugs manifest themselves. There is no evidence that users modify their behaviour to reduce the risks associated with the particular substance indicated by the test and, if there is no behavioural change, there is no potential for harm reduction.

There are also legal issues. As the former substance abuse minister (Hon. Carmel Zollo) pointed out, there are legal issues regarding drug testing, particularly in relation to the possession of illicit substances by users and testers. Under section 31(1) of the Controlled Substances Act a person who possesses an illicit drug commits an offence of possessing a prohibited substance. Upon handing the drug to another person for it to be tested, they could be seen as committing the offence of supply. Similarly, the tester can be

charged with possession while they are holding the drug or testing it; and, of course, when they hand it back to the user they could be charged with supply. So, for those reasons, as outlined by the former minister for substance abuse and the reasons I have gone on to elaborate, the government does not intend to make drug testing kits legal.