



INFORMATION REPORT

TO:	Mayor and Members Board of Health
COMMITTEE DATE:	July 10, 2019
SUBJECT/REPORT NO:	Feasibility of Providing Drug Checking (Fentanyl) Test Strips (BOH19024) (City Wide)
WARD(S) AFFECTED:	City Wide
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SIGNATURE:	

COUNCIL DIRECTION

The Board of Health, at its meeting of March 18, 2019, received a delegation regarding fentanyl test strips and directed staff to investigate the feasibility of providing fentanyl test kits to people who use drugs in the City of Hamilton, to ensure safe consumption, with a report back to a future Board of Health meeting.

INFORMATION

Problematic substance use continues to be an area of significant public health concern within Hamilton. The opioid-related death rate in Hamilton has been consistently higher than the provincial rate and in 2018, there were 103 confirmed opioid-related deaths in Hamilton. There are an additional 19 probable deaths that are still under investigation by the Coroner's Office. In 2019, the trend continues upward as paramedic calls for opioid overdoses continue to rise throughout the city. May 2019 saw the highest number of calls per month, to-date, with 84 calls for opioid overdoses. To date, 2019 has seen three months of at least 80 calls for opioid overdoses (February, March and May). To compare, the previous highest was 75 calls, which occurred in September 2017. Overall, 2019 data shows a significant increase from an average of 38 calls per month in 2018, to 73 calls per month (as of the end of May 2019).

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Addressing the complex issue of problematic substance use requires a comprehensive four pillar approach, with a focus on prevention, harm reduction, treatment and social justice (enforcement). This approach is being used by the Hamilton Drug Strategy, a city-wide collaborative to address the harms associated with substance use.

Background on Drug Checking

An emerging harm reduction intervention is providing people who use drugs (PWUD) with the opportunity to check their substance for content before use. While a relatively new intervention in Canada, drug checking services have been used in some areas in Europe since 1992.¹ In 2016, when it released recommendations on how to address the opioid crisis within Canada, the federal government included one recommendation for the Government of Canada to grant exemptions under the *Controlled Drugs and Substance Act* for the purpose of drug checking at supervised consumption sites as a harm reduction intervention.

Drug checking allows for analysis of the composition of the substance, indicating whether or not fentanyl is present in the substance. This provides the user with information they can consider in their decision of whether to alter their intent to use the substance, in order to prevent adverse impact. In addition, this intervention may assist with learning further information about a current drug supply that is circulating within a community when increases in adverse events are seen within a population. In Ontario, the Province currently only funds drug checking using test strips at Consumption and Treatment Services (CTS) sites. Testing is provided in conjunction with counselling with a harm reduction worker, who can provide information on drug use and overdose prevention.¹

Research evidence on drug testing as an intervention is emerging, as its uptake has increased across Canada and throughout Europe. Studies completed to date on the use of drug checking strips do not indicate that individuals using these tests change their behaviour as a result (e.g. choose to not use the substance or use less substance as a harm reduction strategy). The findings of an evaluation done by InSite, a supervised consumption site in Vancouver, show that a small number of clients chose to discard their drug based upon the results of the drug checking. However, any findings on additional harm reduction interventions (e.g. using less drug) because of the drug checking were not reported.¹

Commercially available drug checking strips can be used with minimal training and are suitable for use in a community setting as they provide quick and actionable results. Advantages of drug checking are that it provides a tool for engagement and harm reduction education for individuals using substances on ways to decrease harms associated with substance use. However, there are limitations, as testing strips only detect a limited number of chemicals. Fentanyl analogues are not always included in these tests and can be difficult to detect.² Drug checking strips also only provide an

indication of whether a chemical (fentanyl) is present, not the concentration, which makes it difficult to understand the overall composition and effects of the drug.

Feasibility of Drug Checking

Within Ontario, fentanyl testing kits from the company BTNX were provided to interested Overdose Prevention Sites (OPS) as requested by the Ministry of Health & Long-Term Care (MOHLTC) for drug checking purposes.³ Within Ontario, the OPS model has been replaced by CTS sites. Fentanyl test strips were and continue to be provided free of charge to interested OPS and now CTS sites via the MOHLTC. Testing strips provided by the MOHLTC are for on-site use, and not for community distribution.

Local Implementation of Drug Checking

Hamilton currently has one OPS transitioning to a CTS site at Hamilton Urban Core Community Health Centre (HUCCHC). While operating as an OPS, HUCCHC did not choose to offer drug checking services on-site. At present there continues to be no plan to offer drug checking strips at this site.

Public Health Services (PHS) is currently completing an application for a CTS site. The range of services offered by PHS at a potential CTS site would be discussed with the MOHLTC during the application process. The provision of drug checking services will be considered through this process.

Further implementation of drug checking services in other harm reduction services provided by PHS is not recommended at this time. Limitations on the accuracy of the drug checking and the impact on substance use does not support implementation of such a service. PHS currently provides harm reduction services through a mobile service, the Van, and it is not feasible for clients to bring their supply to a mobile service such as this. Continued focus of the harm reduction program will be on careful use of substances including not using substances alone, using substances at a CTS site, having naloxone on hand, and using a small amount of substances to prevent overdose. PHS will explore any opportunities that exist for drug checking as a surveillance measure of the local drug supply.

In summary, drug checking is a promising harm reduction intervention that is being implemented in some jurisdictions across Ontario. Drug checking provides further opportunity for engagement at CTS sites with harm reduction workers on safer use of substances. However, current testing strips are unable to detect concentrations and potency of drugs and are often unable to test for all chemicals included in the drug. Further exploration on drug checking to inform surveillance of the local drug supply and provision at a CTS site operated by PHS will continue to be explored.

References

1. Public Health Ontario (2017). Evidence Brief: Drug checking services as a harm reduction intervention.
2. McGowan, C., Harris, M, Platt, L., Hope, V. & Rhodes, T. (2016). Fentanyl self-testing outside supervised injection settings to prevent opioid overdose: do we know enough to promote it? International Journal of Drug Policy, 58, 31-36.
3. Ontario Harm Reduction Network. (2019). The Outreach Network Symposium: Drug Checking Discussion. February 2019.

APPENDICES AND SCHEDULES ATTACHED

Not Applicable.