

TRANSCRIPT

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Transcript: AMA Queensland President, Dr Nick Yim, ABC Radio National, *Breakfast with Sally Sara*, Friday 19 September

Subjects: Pill-testing

SALLY SARA: Queensland's parliament has passed legislation that will effectively ban pill testing in the state. The move reinforces the Crisafulli government's zero tolerance approach to illicit drugs. Testing facilities were stripped of funding and forced to shut down earlier this year. Joining me now is Dr Nick Yim, the president of the Australian Medical Association Queensland. Dr Yim, welcome to Radio National National Breakfast.

DR NICK YIM: Good morning.

SALLY SARA: What's your reaction to the Queensland government's decision here?

DR NICK YIM: We're very disappointed about the decision last night. We know from pill testing, from worldwide research and evidence, it does save lives. It does provide an opportunity for individuals to have their pills tested, but at the same time, and more importantly, have a conversation with a healthcare professional. This might be the first time they ever have spoken to a healthcare professional about drug use, alcohol use, but even potentially an on-referral to a GP or a doctor to have a discussion about other issues. And from our local research and studies, many individuals have also disposed of their illicit drugs and not even taken them at the end of the day.

SALLY SARA: How difficult is it to navigate in this area? You're dealing with evidence on the one hand, trials, but also people have very strong moral and ethical views about illicit drugs.

DR NICK YIM: It is very challenging. I can see how it's difficult. But one difficult thing at the moment in Queensland and in Australia, we don't have a real-time drug monitoring system. We don't know when new illicit drugs are entering the market. And some of them can be really potent. We know only a couple of months ago we had synthetic narcotics that were entering Queensland that are 40 times more potent than fentanyl. And as you can imagine, if an individual ingests it, that could lead to an overdose that might lead to an emergency or an ICU presentation, or potentially death. Without pill testing available, this unfortunately may lead to increased emergency presentations and even tragically may lead to deaths in our community.

SALLY SARA: The government says, quote, drug checking services may send the wrong message to Queenslanders and that there is no safe way to take drugs. Do you think that testing sites can encourage people to take illicit substances? It provides something of a safety net.

DR NICK YIM: We have not seen any evidence that suggests this. At the same time, we've not seen any evidence locally or worldwide to demonstrate that pill testing does cause harm. It's actually the contrary. We have actually seen a reduction in potentially people disposing of their illicit drugs. This is something where it's a facility that provides a service. We have seen interstate, unfortunately, there have been overdoses and deaths at music festivals. And I don't want to see this in Queensland.

SALLY SARA: You're listening to Radio National Breakfast. My guest is Dr Nick Yim. Nick is the Australian Medical Association's President in Queensland. We're talking about the Queensland government's decision to legislate a ban on drug testing facilities. Nick, did the Queensland Government consult with the AMA prior to this decision?

DR NICK YIM: This is probably one of the most disappointing features in this decision and legislative change in amendments. Obviously, there's many stakeholders and community groups that would have liked input into this. With such an important issue, it would have been great for the Queensland Government to consult all stakeholders in the community and also look at the evidence from both sides. That UQ independent report, it was only released last night, so as you can imagine there was not enough time to even review all the evidence.

SALLY SARA: What do you think about that?

DR NICK YIM: It sets a potentially dangerous precedent. I think we really need to be looking at evidence when we are making healthcare decisions and listening to the experts. We know that speaking to important key stakeholders [is important]. An overdose for an individual doesn't affect just that individual. It causes a ripple for that family, friends, the health professionals involved that treat the person and also to the wider community, which is the reason why it's so important to have this discussion.

SALLY SARA: We're coming into festival season. People often will take drugs at those events. Are you concerned of the possibility of seeing a rise in harm from illicit substance use in Queensland?

DR NICK YIM: That is one of the major concerns regarding this. We know that curiosity plays a big role in our young adults and even adults in general. It's something where we are unfortunately never going to stop drugs in our community. It's something that we have seen it for years and depending on the change in legislation throughout the many decades, drug use still occurs in the community. And pill checking was one proposed solution to assist in identifying what illicit substances are available in the community and also how toxic [they are], which is the reason why I suspect that such increased harms may occur. Unfortunately, this will put additional pressures on our already stretched healthcare system.

SALLY SARA: Dr Nick Yim, thank you for your time this morning.

DR NICK YIM: Always a pleasure, thank you.

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