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# Drug Checking Symposium October 5–7, 2023

## Summary Report

March 2024

### Project Partner



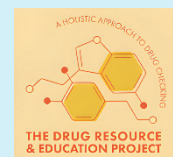
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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.



## Executive Summary

Drug checking is a community-based harm reduction service aimed at identifying the contents of drugs from the unregulated market. It can reduce the harms associated with the unregulated drug supply by giving people more control over their choices. It can also help us understand trends in the unregulated drug supply to guide service and policy decisions.

The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA) has coordinated the National Drug Checking Working Group (NDCWG) since 2015. Together with its co-chairs from the Drug Resource and Education (DRED) Project, the NDCWG teamed up with the BC Centre on Substance Use (BCCSU) Drug Checking Program to organize an in-person symposium in Vancouver in October 2023.

The objectives of the symposium were as follows:

- To facilitate knowledge exchange and mobilization across British Columbia and Canada through sharing of tools, resources and expertise;
- To engage in comprehensive dialogue to create a cohesive and sustainable drug checking approach across British Columbia and Canada;
- To create networking opportunities and stimulate meaningful conversations among people involved in drug checking; and
- To reconfigure and rejuvenate the NDCWG.

This report describes the proceedings of the symposium. It includes summaries of plenary and breakout sessions on each of the three days and information on attendees and responses to a post-event survey.

The sessions and discussions summarized in this report show that there is a wide spectrum of topics in the drug checking field that demand ongoing dialogue and knowledge exchange. These include service development and implementation, technician capacity and well-being, meaningful engagement of different communities, advocacy strategies for support and funding, navigating legal and regulatory frameworks, ethical data sharing and dissemination, and integrating drug checking into broader harm reduction and public health frameworks. The report also highlights the value of in-person meetings, as this helped foster a sense of community, mutual support and collective momentum that will help drive action on these topics.

Next steps include:

- Growing and strengthening the national, provincial and territorial communities of practice and working groups;
- Defining strategies to overcoming gaps and challenges identified at the symposium; and
- Collectively defining a roadmap that will shape the future of drug checking and ultimately decrease harms associated with the toxic unregulated drug supply in Canada.



# Background

## About Drug Checking

Drug checking is a harm reduction service aimed at identifying the contents of drugs from the unregulated market. Drug checking services can be delivered in communities through various models. These include point-of-care services offered at fixed locations or events or through mobile services, offsite testing of samples collected in the community and delivered to a lab, centralized analysis of data collected at community sites (distributed model), and mail-in services. For more detailed descriptions, see [Chapter 2 of the Drug Resource & Education \(DRED\) Project manual](#) or the [BC Centre on Substance Use Drug Checking Implementation Guide](#).

Drug checking is a public health service that can help people make informed decisions and have more control over their choices, reducing the harms associated with the toxic unregulated drug supply. Beyond communicating drug contents to clients, drug checking can also help us understand trends in the unregulated drug supply in the location where samples were collected. This makes drug checking unique in its ability to provide timely information on drug supply contents, unlike most data sources currently being leveraged for surveillance of the toxic supply.

**Benefits** of drug checking, as summarized by Toronto's Drug Checking Service's [10 key findings related to the impact of Toronto's Drug Checking Service](#), include that it does the following :

- Provides potentially life-saving information to those at highest risk of overdose
- Facilitates behaviour change
- Provides a gateway to accessing harm reduction services
- Enables monitoring of the unregulated drug market and public dissemination of drug market trends in real time
- Informs clinicians and care
- Improves health and social services
- Empowers people who use drugs to advocate for themselves and help develop solutions that impact them
- Generates evidence to support advocacy for systems improvement
- Is valuable to people who use drugs

**Technologies** used by drug checking services range from test strips that can determine whether a substance is present to highly sensitive gold-standard equipment used by pharmacology and toxicology laboratories that can provide detailed information about sample components and quantities. For a list of technologies currently available in Canada, please consult [Chapter 3 of the Drug Resource and Education Project Manual](#), the BC Centre on Substance Use's [Overview of Technologies](#) and Toronto's Drug Checking Service's [Drug checking technologies overview](#). The most common technologies referenced in this report are immunoassay test strips (rapid tests that can detect the presence of a specific substance in a sample) for fentanyl, benzodiazepines and xylazine; Fourier-transform infrared (FTIR) spectrometry, a more sophisticated tool that can determine the major components of a sample; and mass spectrometry, including liquid chromatography-mass spectrometry (LC-MS), gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS), and paper spray mass



spectrometry (PS-MS), which are highly sensitive and can determine concentrations of components in a sample and are therefore often used for confirmatory testing.

**Legal considerations** for drug checking services are complex. Since it involves the collection, transport, handling, storage, and disposal of unregulated drugs, all of which are currently prohibited by Canada's *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act* (CDSA), operating a drug checking service requires an exemption from the federal laws that prohibit these activities. This is typically done through exemption from Section 56 of the CDSA, which involves a lengthy and stringent application process. For more information on this process, consult [Chapter 2 of the Drug Resource and Education Project \(DRED\) Manual](#).

## About the Working Groups

The **National Drug Checking Working Group (NDCWG)** originated in June 2015 after CCSA hosted a meeting on [preventing drug- and alcohol-related harms at music festivals in Canada](#). An important recommendation from the meeting was to further explore drug checking. Following the meeting, those offering or interested in offering drug checking services began to meet informally, and after a time the 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. In 2022, CCSA partnered with members of the **Drug Resource and Education (DRED) Project** to jointly chair the NDCWG. The DRED Project's mission is to provide practical guidance on the constantly evolving best practices for drug checking regarding harm reduction, service implementation and messaging in a variety of settings (e.g., festival or community settings). Members of the DRED Project had been part of the inception and evolution of the NDCWG, and as co-chairs are now able to provide insights and guidance on how the NDCWG can best serve the community's needs.

Since its beginnings as a working group, the NDCWG has evolved into a vibrant community of practice, serving important knowledge exchange and capacity-building functions among existing and emerging services. In October 2023 the group had 56 active members (of over 250 who have come and gone over the years) from eight provinces and territories, representing a variety of sectors including community-based services, public health, research and academia, technology and lab analysis, nongovernmental organizations, and all levels of government.

**BC's Provincial Drug Checking Working Group (PDCWG)** is a network of provincial participants convened quarterly by the BC Ministry of Mental Health & Addictions. Its membership includes technicians and other program staff involved in planning, delivering and evaluating community drug checking services, regional and provincial health authority representatives including public health leadership, organizations such as BC Centre on Substance Use and the University of Victoria, and involved provincial ministries. **The BC Centre on Substance Use Drug Checking program** — hosted by Providence Health Care and the University of British Columbia — provides provincial training support, operational guidance and ongoing evaluation in conjunction with a network of FTIR drug checking services operating in all five B.C. regional health authorities. BCCSU was a key contributor to this event with extensive support from the membership of the PDCWG.

## About the Meeting

Following successful and productive in-person meetings in 2017 (Harm Reduction International Conference), 2018 (Stimulus Conference), and 2019 (Issues of Substance Conference, in collaboration with the Canadian Research Institute on Substance Misuse (CRISM) Quebec-Atlantic



Node), and a pause due to the pandemic, the NDCWG membership decided to resume meeting in person in 2023, in part due to a surge in new drug checking services and NDCWG members who wanted to connect with others. At the same time, the BCCSU Drug Checking team was planning their annual provincial meeting aimed at the PDCWG membership. Therefore, the two groups decided to organize a joint event with the following objectives:

- To facilitate knowledge exchange and mobilization across British Columbia and Canada through sharing of tools, resources and expertise;
- To engage in comprehensive dialogue aiming to create a cohesive and sustainable drug checking approach across B.C. and Canada;
- To create networking opportunities and stimulate meaningful conversations among interested parties in drug checking; and
- To reconfigure and rejuvenate the NDCWG.

Meeting registration drew 93 registrants from nine provinces and territories (see Appendix and Figures 1 and 2).

**Figure 1: Home location of attendees**

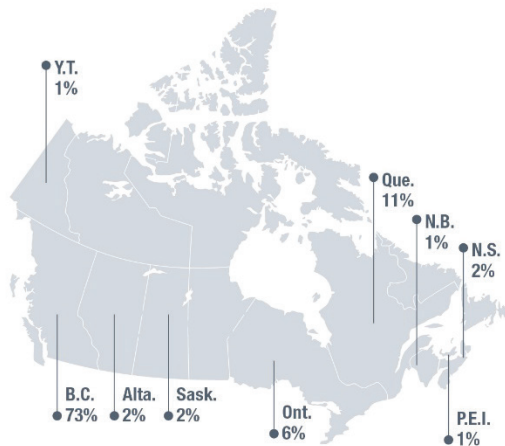
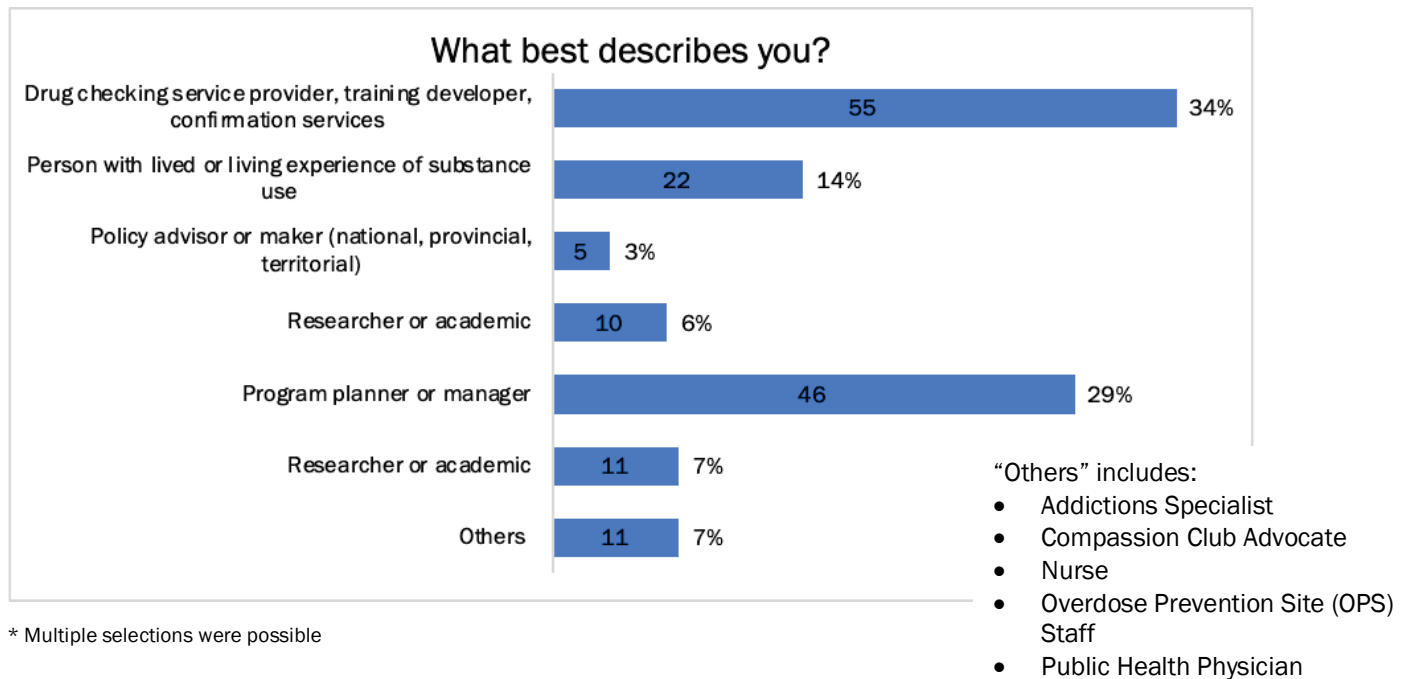




Figure 2: Attendee sectors\*



## Meeting Summary: Panels and Presentations



Figure 3: Plenary room, Day 1. Photo Credit: Kevin Hollett, photographer for BCCSU.



## Day 1 – Morning

### *Opening and Welcome*

**Speakers:** Elder Syexwáliya, Squamish Nation; Jarred Aasen, DRED Project; Jennifer Matthews, BC Centre on Substance Use (BCCSU).

Elder Syexwáliya opened the meeting and welcomed participants to the unceded territory of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the territories of the x<sup>w</sup>məθkwəy'əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səɬ'ílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations, with wise words on energies, trust and coming together to support a common journey. She spoke about the importance of listening to each other and learning from those who came before us, those with lived experience, and those actually doing the work – the people in the room. Her graceful yet energetic spirit laid the foundation for fruitful and spirited engagement at the symposium.

Jarred Aasen and Jenny Matthews then welcomed participants and gave an overview of the three days to come: Day 1, many speakers focused on activities in B.C.; Day 2, more interactive and focused on issues faced across the country; and Day 3, focused on future planning for the National Drug Checking Working Group (NDCWG).

### *Plenary Panel: Tla'amin Nation: A First Nations Community Experience of Developing and Launching a Drug Checking Service*

**Speakers:** Marlane Paul, Tla'amin Nation; Courtney Harrop, Tla'amin Nation; Kathryn Colby, qathet CAT/LIFT Community Services.

Marlane Paul introduced Tla'amin Nation's seven-year strategic health wellness plan, which emphasizes restoring connection to each other, to the land and water, to the Ta'ow (traditional teachings), and to Tla'amin culture and language to restore community health. She highlighted delivery of a land-based healing program, which combines traditional practice, celebration, ceremony and culture revitalization with harm reduction. She also described a client-centred wellness model where programs and services are delivered by interdisciplinary teams spanning primary care, harm reduction and traditional wellness at the Nation.

Courtney Harrop described Tla'amin Nation's ʔajłmæt Harm Reduction Circle, a community-led program consisting of peers, clinical support staff and mental health staff. The program offers shelter, harm reduction supplies, grief support and food, with trust and safety as key components. Harm reduction services include a drug checking site established in collaboration with Lift Community Services (LCS), BCCSU, and Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH). She noted that theirs is the first and only First Nation FTIR drug checking service on lands (on reserve or on treaty settlement lands) in 'Canada'.

Kathryn Colby described some of the drug checking efforts by LCS in the qathet Regional District, where they operate an FTIR and issue community drug alerts based on drug checking results. She, too, noted that connection and trust are at the base of their success.

### *Concurrent Breakout 1A: Working with Drug Checking Data to Increase Its Public Health Impact: What Are the Possibilities?*

**Speakers:** Jarred Aasen, DRED Project, Lantern Services; Alexis Crabtree, BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC); Margot Kuo, Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC). Moderator: Doris Payer, CCSA.



This panel explored the potential of drug checking beyond direct harm reduction, emphasizing its role in the broader public health landscape.

Jarred Aasen provided an example of his experience at the local level, discussing his work comparing opioid prescribing practices to actual exposure patterns among people who use drugs as revealed by drug checking. The comparison showed the mismatch between the two, leading to prescribers feeling comfortable to increase dose limit adjustments based on empirical evidence on the local drug market. He also explained how this could be translated and scaled up to other audiences.

Alexis Crabtree discussed the use of drug checking data in public alerting in BC. She described how information is collected, assessed for risk and communicated to the public, expanding on how decisions around communication are made (and noting that although people appreciate getting alerts, their practical impact is as yet unclear). She also spoke to other public health applications of drug checking data such as better meeting the needs of people who use drugs and evaluating drug policy changes.

Margot Kuo provided insights into the national data landscape. She argued that a large formal national data system may not be needed, but that benefits of comparable data included tracking changes in supply toxicity and differences across regions, supporting toxicology lab priorities, and demonstrating the volatility of the drug supply as a key driver of harms. She also stressed the importance of dedicated and sustained funding for drug checking programs to enable the collection and analysis of data.

The session also featured insightful comments and questions from the audience, including the need for improved data quantification, guidance for engaging with media, and reporting aggregated results at regular intervals.

### ***Concurrent Breakout 1B: Consolidating BC Operational Guidance for Safe Handling of Controlled Substances***

**Speakers:** Mona Kwong, BCCSU Interdisciplinary Addiction Medicine Fellowship; Kiara Mclean, Northern Health (NH). **Moderator:** Jennifer Matthews, BCCSU.

Kiara Mclean shared insights about the challenges faced in implementing drug checking services in the northwest BC in 2022. This is due to dissonance between provincial standards and WorkSafeBC perspectives. A visit from WorkSafeBC soon after NH's launch triggered discussions between WorkSafeBC and NH, with NH's Occupational Health & Safety team playing a vital role in managing conversations and alleviating the burden on frontline staff. WorkSafeBC demonstrated a limited understanding of the nuances of drug checking services, existing literature around exposure risk, and evidence-based practices. The team has been challenged to move forward with offering this vital prevention service while working to meet high-barrier expectations in environmental controls and personal protective equipment (PPE). At the same time, provincial work is being done to create standardized safe work procedures that are based in evidence.

Audience members expressed shock at the stringent PPE requirements and restrictions imposed by WorkSafeBC officers, which reinforced stigma and did not fully embrace harm reduction principles.

Jennifer Matthews and Mona Kwong spoke about the development of evidence-based and practice-informed [guidance for handling and transporting drugs](#). The guidance is intended to help prioritize risks and recognize contraindicated requirements (e.g., double gloves), and it emphasizes low-barrier access and safety. The guidance will be published shortly and reviewed in 12 months.



Audience comments brought up the importance of standardization, knowledge translation and the long-term exposure risks as drug checking evolves into a profession.

### ***Concurrent Breakout 1C: Drugs, Drug Checking and FTIR Spectroscopy***

**Speakers:** Jen Angelucci, BCCSU; Jana Baller, Fraser Health; Ava Margolese, Allen Custance and Miriam Sherman, Substance Drug Checking; Angus Quinton, Get Your Drugs Tested; Moderator: Antoine Marcheterre, Interior Health.

Jen Angelucci and Jana Baller discussed the prevalence of fentanyl analogues in BC and the challenges in detecting them, including variations in detection limits and the emergence of new analogues.

Ava Margolese, Allen Custance and Miriam Sherman discussed their workflow, highlighting the use of FTIR spectroscopy and the complementary application of paper spray mass spectrometry (PS-MS) for detecting chemicals in trace amounts.

Angus Quinton provided practical solutions for testing LSD, primarily through test strips and Ehrlich reagent, highlighting that there is no real way to test for potency of LSD and that trust is paramount.

Audience questions touched on communicating information about fentanyl analogues, technology setups and what to do in poisoning situations.

## **DAY 1 – Afternoon**

### ***Plenary Panel: Focus on Drug Checking for Youth: What Are Young People's Priorities?***

**Speakers:** Haleigh Anderson, BCCSU Youth Advisory Committee, At Risk Youth Study; Mazal Neptune Jensen, BCCSU Youth Advisory Committee, At Risk Youth Study; Kali Sedgemore, Coalition of PEERS Dismantling the Drug War (CPDDW), Peer Engagement and Evaluation Project (PEEP) with BCCDC. Moderator: Chloe Sage, Interior Health, DRED Project.

The panellists discussed the pressing concerns and priorities of young people related to drug checking. They clearly stated the need for youth-focused harm reduction spaces, emphasizing the need for safe, comfortable and nonjudgmental spaces for youth to access services including drug checking. They advocated for the expansion of hubs that offer multiple services, highlighted the importance of educating youth about options available to them and addressed issues of accessibility and stigma. The panellists stressed the value of working with peers with lived experience and understanding the specific needs of youth. They also stressed the importance of asking youth about their needs rather than prescribing them. They shared personal experiences and insights to create a better and more youth-friendly approach to harm reduction and drug checking services.

### ***Concurrent Breakout 2A: Piloting PS-MS for Complementary-Confirmatory Testing: The How and the Why***

**Speakers:** Allie Miskulin and Taylor Teal, Substance Drug Checking, University of Victoria. Moderator: Jenny Matthews, BCCSU.

The Substance team presented their multi-instrument drug checking program, which offers FTIR spectroscopy and test strip results within 20 minutes and detailed information on sample composition via PS-MS (paper spray mass spectrometry). The session discussed the workflow of PS-



MS and the distributed model of drug checking on Vancouver Island, where FTIR spectra collection takes place at five sites and interpretation takes place remotely. Samples are also collected at these sites and shipped to Substance for PS-MS analysis. The audience also inquired about site selection, the cost of running the machine, and the operation of the PS-MS instrument, which was explained in detail.

### ***Concurrent Breakout 2B: Drugs, Drug Checking and FTIR Spectroscopy***

**Speakers:** Kile McKenna, Ask Wellness; Jarred Aasen, DRED Project; Moderator and Speaker: Antoine Marcheterre, Interior Health.

Kile McKenna addressed the complications caused by water interference in FTIR spectroscopy, emphasizing the difficulties in recognizing and quantifying water in mixture analysis.

Antoine Marcheterre delved into GHB, discussing its dosing, harm reduction practices, and the complexities of GHB (gamma-hydroxybutyrate) drug checking due in part to a shifting equilibrium between the free acid and GBL (gamma-butyrolactone) when in aqueous solution.

Jarred Aasen discussed the molecule DMT (N,N-dimethyltryptamine), which is the active ingredient in ayahuasca and changa. He touched on the challenges and possibilities in drug checking DMT freebase extracted from plants, in organic mixtures and DMT vape liquid.

Questions revolved around messaging DMT results to parents who are drug-naïve. There was also discussion around prevalence of GHB in other drugs.

### ***Concurrent Breakout 3A: Strengthening Drug Checking Technician Training***

**Speakers:** Jana Baller, Fraser Health; David Byres, BCCSU; Chloe Sage, Interior Health, DRED Project; Taylor Teal, Substance Drug Checking, University of Victoria; Angus Quinton, Get Your Drugs Tested. **Moderator:** Julie-Soleil Meeson, Association des intervenants en dépendance du Québec (AIDQ), DRED Project.

The panellists shed light on the challenges and strategies associated with training drug checking technicians in B.C. The session highlighted Substance's unique training model, where staff across Vancouver Island's five drug checking sites are trained to collect but not interpret data and data are sent for processing to a centralized technician. It also highlighted BCCSU's standardized training model, which includes an introductory online course, a practicum, an exam, and a soon-to-come train-the-trainer model. Panellists described challenges of their training models, including the lack of capacity to train, staff turnover, and the need for funding for training, and noted that a community of practice for technicians is providing one solution to these challenges. The panel emphasized the importance of leveraging the expertise of experienced technicians, fostering a supportive community of practice, and catering training to diverse backgrounds including those with technical or scientific experience and those with lived experience. Retention strategies included close-knit communities, curiosity and a passion for the work, while client interactions formed an integral part of training to ensure technicians could communicate effectively with service users.



### ***Concurrent Breakout 3B: Drug Checking and Community Pharmacy Partners: Exploring Opportunities for Further Access***

Speakers: Jarred Aasen, DRED Project, Lantern Services; Mona Kwong, BCCSU Interdisciplinary Addiction Medicine Fellowship Program; Moderator: Rahim Janmohammed, BCCSU Pharmacist Fellow, Vancouver Coastal Health.

Jarred Aasen raised the idea of using pharmacies as sample collection sites and for pharmacists to relay drug checking results. This would require guidelines and templates as well as additional drug education for pharmacists and could work by using pharmacies as sample drop-off points while sharing equipment and consultation space. He also responded to questions about the potential role of pharmacists in safe supply and OAT, how to identify and approach appropriate pharmacies, and accessing appropriate information.

Mona Kwong described the real-world example of the Medicine Shoppe Pharmacy in Vernon, B.C., which is a remote and smaller community. The pharmacy contributes to harm reduction, offers vital information, and engages with the community, highlighting the importance of trust and nonstigmatizing spaces.

### ***Concurrent Breakout 3C: Emerging B.C. research***

Speakers: Hannah Crepault, BCCSU; Dennis Hore and Bruce Wallace, Substance Drug Checking, University of Victoria. Moderator: Matthew Fleury, BCCSU.

Hannah Crepault presented research evaluating behaviour change resulting from drug checking. The results revealed that people who were surprised by or pleased with results reported different risk reduction practices profiles than those who were not, but no association was found between fentanyl presence and risk reduction.

Dennis Hore and Bruce Wallace described the benefits and challenges of university-based drug checking work and described their three main areas of their work: (1) implementation research and development of harm reduction and equity frameworks, (2) development of instruments and automated analysis and messaging, and (3) best practices in data reporting and communication.

The Q & A session raised points including difficulty investing in technology when operations are only funded for short periods despite higher ongoing maintenance costs, evaluating behaviour change other than discarding drugs (including drug literacy as a valuable outcome in itself), the need for “evidence making” (vs. evidence-based) interventions that create an evidence base to evaluate, organized ways to effectively communicate research results, and the need for dedicated secure funding.



Figure 4: Group shot of Symposium attendees, Day 1. Photo credit: Kevin Hollett, photographer for BCCSU.

## DAY 2 – Morning

### *Canadian Drug Checking Working Group: Collaborating for Safer Communities*

Speakers: Doris Payer, CCSA; Julie-Soleil Meeson, AIDQ, DRED Project; Jarred Aasen, DRED Project, Lantern Services.

Doris Payer and Julie-Soleil Meeson delivered a land acknowledgement and welcomed participants to Day 2. They gave an overview of the day as a participatory exercise in the morning and a single-track series of panels in the afternoon.

To expand the conversation to the national context, Julie-Soleil Meeson provided an overview of the history and milestones of the NDCWG. Doris Payer then described the current function of the NDCWG as a multisectoral community of practice and highlighted vital contributions of the community to work in the field. Finally, Jarred Aasen presented an interactive map that showed the beginnings and expansion of drug checking services in Canada over time, which was received with great enthusiasm.



Figure 5: Map of Canadian drug checking services, Day 2. Photo Credit: Kevin Hollett, photographer for BCCSU.

### ***The Newspaper Exercise: Read All About It!***

Moderator: Chloe Sage, Interior Health, DRED Project.

The objective of this participatory activity was to share and educate others about drug checking work happening across Canada. Meeting attendees were asked to create a newspaper front page showcasing what they were working on in drug checking, including highlights, challenges, upcoming developments and success stories. Participants were divided by region and created their cover page with others from their region, each contributing headlines from their specific program. Participants then came back together and presented their newspaper front page to the group.

Regions and newspaper titles were:

- Central Canada: “We Are Here, Deal With It”
- Eastern Canada: “Forget COVID, The Next Wave Is Drug Checking”
- Interior BC: “Inside Out, Everywhere But The Coast”
- Lower Mainland BC: “The Trying Times – 50-year Crisis Where’s The Response?”
- Vancouver: “The Vancouver Drugzette”



- Island B.C.: “The Daily Down”

## **DAY 2 – Afternoon**

### ***Panel: How Drug Checking Can Support Compassion Clubs***

Speakers: Bruce Wallace, Substance Drug Checking, University of Victoria; Mike Knott and Mark Wilson, SOLID; Sara Guzman Castro, University of British Columbia, Hein Lab; Jeremy Kalicum, DULF. Moderator: Chloe Sage, Interior Health, DRED Project.

The panellists discussed the role of drug checking beyond individual harm reduction, particularly its ability to shape the drug market and enable broader information sharing. The panellists pointed to the constantly changing drug supply as driving the need to apply drug checking at this broader scale and mentioned benefits such as improved community awareness and trust. They also discussed the challenges of doing this work, including technology limitations and the need for rapid turnaround. The discussion also pointed to opportunities for academic institutions to support this work. The Q & A session prompted panellists to elaborate on data sharing and the potential of shared information libraries, considerations around community alerting, and strategies for smaller and rural communities.

### ***Panel: Out There: Drug Checking in Rural and Remote Communities***

Speakers: Kathryn Balind, Groupe de recherche et d'intervention psychosociale (GRIP); Chris Kling, ANKORS; Courtney Harrop, Tla'amin Nation; Jenn Smith, Blood Ties Four Directions Centre; Kiara Mclean, Northern Health. Moderator: Antoine Marcheterre, Interior Health.

The panel discussed the challenges and strategies for implementing drug checking services in sparsely populated rural and remote communities. One common challenge was the spread-out nature of these communities, making it crucial to ensure timely results and establish the value of drug checking services with service users. Strategies included mobile drug checking vans, collaboration with outreach workers, and providing results via text messages and other methods preferred by service users. The panel also touched on the limitations of rural communities, including funding, anonymity and stigma, and they highlighted the need for ongoing community engagement and cultural sensitivity in their efforts. Despite the challenges, they were committed to providing these vital services in their respective regions and emphasized the importance of building trust and relationships with the people they served.

### ***Panel: Getting It Right: Lived Experience Expertise and Community Engagement at the Core of Successful Drug Checking Implementation***

Speakers: James Kaufman, ANKORS; Lori Kufner, TRIP! Project; Tanis Oldenburger, Mountainside Harm Reduction; Shelby Suazo, Alberta Alliance Who Educates and Advocates Responsibly (AAWEAR). Moderator: Chloe Sage, Interior Health, DRED Project.

This session highlighted the importance of community engagement and authentic outreach in drug checking programs. The panellists stressed the significance of building trust with the community and advised connecting with networks of people who use drugs to establish needs and preferences. They also discussed the need for different approaches for young people and reaching diverse communities, including operating with low barriers, requiring no personal information from participants, and creating nonmedicalized, trust-based spaces to make harm reduction services more accessible and comfortable. In response to audience questions the panel members shared



valuable insights into making harm reduction services more community-oriented, emphasizing authenticity, trust and flexibility in response to community needs. They highlighted the importance of meeting individuals where they are in their substance use journey and engaging with communities in meaningful ways to ensure the success of drug checking programs.

### ***Presentation: New Drug Checking Devices: Considerations in a Changing Landscape***

Speakers: Jennifer Mathews, BCCSU; Karen McDonald, Toronto's Drug Checking Project.

This session showcased the number of different instruments currently in development by private vendors and universities using both for-profit and nonprofit models. The presentation demonstrated the complexity of navigating the evolving drug checking technology landscape and underscored the need for accountability, transparency and effective oversight of claims made by vendors. The presenters acknowledged the need for technology innovation, but also noted the increasing presence of for-profit companies coupled with a lack of regulation and publicly published quantitative data to verify the claims made by these companies. To address this issue, Karen McDonald highlighted a resource developed by Toronto's Drug Checking Service, [Onsite drug checking technology purchase and partnership considerations](#), to help guide service providers in assessing claims about technologies, asking critical questions and ensuring a transparent approach to limitations. The presenters concluded with a call for standards to help evaluate vendor claims and categorize the stage of development for new technologies to provide a better, more transparent way of managing technology innovation.

The audience engaged in conversations about the need for unbiased data, potential open-source models and the complexities of interactions with emerging companies in the field.

### ***Closing Remarks***

Speakers: Elder Syexwáliya, Squamish Nation; Doris Payer, CCSA; Julie-Soleil Meeson, AIDQ, DRED Project.

Doris Payer and Julie-Soleil Meeson closed the day — and the portion of the symposium open to all attendees — by expressing gratitude to the attendees, speakers and coordinators, as well as the logistics and programming committees and the symposium's sponsors. They also invited anyone who might be interested in strategic planning for the NDCWG to join for the final day.

Elder Syexwáliya then closed the meeting with a personal anecdote and a reminder to respect the natural world and learn to listen and feel the rhythms of nature as nature will always provide what is needed. This included the importance of ravens, their memory of people and their guidance when lost — a gentle reminder that meaningful connections are important in driving the change we need.

## **DAY 3**

### ***Drug Checking Action Lab: Crafting the Future Together***

Moderator: Julie-Soleil Meeson, Association des intervenants en dépendance du Québec (AIDQ), DRED Project.

Julie-Soleil Meeson welcomed attendees and invited them to share an interesting, unexpected or memorable learning from the previous two days.



She then described the collaborative exercise that would make up the rest of the day: A “World Café” style discussion focused on specific topics relevant to drug checking, with the goal of fostering meaningful dialogue and generating actionable ideas that will drive the advancement of drug checking practices in Canada. The exercise featured seven discussion tables, each centred around a specific topic:

- Community engagement
- Funding
- Training
- Awareness and continuing education
- Technology
- Data sharing
- Political, legal, and regulatory frameworks

Participants had the opportunity to choose and rotate through three different discussion tables and were encouraged to share insights, challenges and innovative solutions for the chosen topic by addressing four key questions:

- What is working well? What advantages do we have?
- What are current gaps that need to be addressed?
- What opportunities exist or may arise in the near future?
- What challenges or obstacles are currently affecting this area?

Each discussion table then reported back on key themes of the three conversation rounds. Results from this exercise will be presented in a forthcoming strategic report.

### ***The Next Chapter: Shaping Our Collective Vision for the Pan-Canadian Drug Checking Community***

Moderator: Julie-Soleil Meeson, Association des intervenants en dépendance du Québec (AIDQ), DRED Project.

The day ended with a discussion of possible mandates, terms and conditions, and names for the national group. Results from this exercise will be presented in a forthcoming strategic report.

## **Post-Event Evaluation and Comments**

At the end of the event, 33 attendees completed a post-event survey. Of these, 100% agreed or strongly agreed that the symposium met the stated objectives, were satisfied or very satisfied with the overall content, and agreed or strongly agreed that they will apply what they learned in their work. Of survey respondents, 93.9% found the symposium useful or very useful to their practice, while 6.1% found it somewhat useful.

The comments left by respondents indicated that the most positive or useful elements of the symposium were the following:



- Networking and collaboration: These were mentioned many times, including the importance of connecting with others, learning from different organizations, and building relationships.
- Learning and knowledge sharing: Many respondents commented on their enjoyment of the content and presenters, and opportunities to learn about service models, technologies and research as well as community engagement, cultural sensitivity and access to services.
- Community building: Many comments expressed a sense of community and camaraderie, highlighting the positive atmosphere and the opportunity to connect with colleagues.

“I feel really inspired by the practices I've discovered to implement new ways of working at my organization. I also feel more compelled than ever to get involved with activism!”

“This symposium was amazing. It was a very rejuvenating experience.”

“I got so much out of this symposium and had a really great time. Going to miss everyone, excited for the next one!”

## Conclusions and Next Steps

There is a wide spectrum of topics in the drug checking field that demand ongoing discussion and knowledge exchange. These include practical topics such as service development and implementation, technician capacity and well-being, meaningful engagement of different communities, and navigating the emerging technology landscape. Other topics include more abstract and systems-level topics such as advocacy strategies for support and funding, navigating legal and regulatory frameworks, ethical data sharing and dissemination practices, and integrating drug checking into broader harm reduction and public health frameworks. For each of these topics, learning and sharing what works, what doesn't and why is more important than ever as an increasing number of drug checking services try to meet the demand created by an unabating drug poisoning crisis.

Importantly, the symposium also demonstrated the value of in-person meetings. Not only did it enable discussion and integration of this broad array of topics in a unified experience, it also helped foster a sense of community, mutual support and collective momentum that cannot be easily replicated virtually.

To build on this momentum and begin to address some of the issues raised at the symposium, we plan to do as follows:

- Grow the national community of practice and enhance its knowledge exchange and resource sharing capabilities to better support dialogue and collaboration;
- Create thematic cross-country working groups to advance practice and action;
- Continue development of provincial initiatives and strategies in B.C. to advance drug checking in the province and serve as a model for other jurisdictions; and



- Collectively define a roadmap that will define challenges in the field, guide strategies to overcome them and shape the future of drug checking across Canada.

As we move forward, it is essential to capitalize on the momentum generated at this event and channel our collective energy into tangible actions that will benefit the entire drug checking community and Canadians as a whole.



## Resources

- [The Drug Resource and Education \(DRED\) Project: A Holistic Approach to Drug Checking](#)
- [British Columbia Centre on Substance Use \(BCCSU\) – Manuals and Guidelines](#)
- [Toronto's Drug Checking Service – Resources](#)
- [Preventing Drug- and Alcohol-related Harms at Music Festivals in Canada](#)



## Appendix

### Drug Checking Symposium Attendees

| Jurisdiction     | Organization                                                     | Position(s)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Alberta          | Alberta Alliance Who Educates and Advocates Responsibly (AAWEAR) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drug Checking Technical Lead</li> <li>• Drug Checking Program Manager / Jr. Director of Programs</li> </ul>                                                                                                  |
| British Columbia | AIDS Network Kootenay Outreach and Support Society (ANKORS)      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drug Checking Program Coordinator</li> <li>• Drug Checking Technician</li> </ul>                                                                                                                             |
|                  | ASK Wellness                                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drug Checking Lead</li> <li>• FTIR Drug Checking Technician</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                       |
|                  | British Columbia Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC)              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public Health Physician, Substance Use and Harm Reduction</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                         |
|                  | British Columbia Centre on Substance Use (BCCSU)                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drug Checking Implementation Lead</li> <li>• Research Scientists, Research Coordinators, Research Assistants</li> <li>• Training Coordinator</li> <li>• Project Manager</li> <li>• Policy Advisor</li> </ul> |
|                  | Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research (CISUR)            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Researcher</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|                  | Drug Resource and Education (DRED) Project                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National Drug Checking Working Group (NDCWG) Co-Chairs</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                            |
|                  | First Nations Health Authority                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nurse Practice Consultant, Substance Use</li> <li>• Regional Addictions Specialists</li> <li>• Project Manager</li> </ul>                                                                                    |
|                  | Fraser Health                                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drug Checking Lead</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                |
|                  | Get Your Drugs Tested                                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manager</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|                  | Interior Health                                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drug Checking Lead</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                |
|                  | Island Health                                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manager, PPH Substance Use and Harm Reduction</li> <li>• Harm Reduction Coordinator</li> </ul>                                                                                                               |
|                  | LIFT Community Services                                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manager</li> <li>• Overdose Prevention Services Coordinator</li> <li>• FTIR Spectrometer Technician and Education Coordinator</li> </ul>                                                                     |
|                  | Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Director, Policy &amp; Partnerships</li> <li>• Policy Analyst</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                     |
|                  | Mountainside Harm Reduction Society                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drug Checking Technicians</li> <li>• Executive Director</li> <li>• Project Manager</li> </ul>                                                                                                                |
|                  | Northern Health                                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drug Checking Technicians</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                         |



|                      |                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                      |                                                                                                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic Lead Overdose Response</li> <li>• Regional Nursing Lead, Harm Reduction</li> <li>• Program Lead</li> <li>• Clinical Practice Lead</li> </ul>                            |
|                      | Purpose Society                                                                                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Harm Reduction Program Coordinator</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                     |
|                      | Solid Outreach Society                                                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Director</li> <li>• Officer, Board of Directors</li> </ul>                                                                                                                        |
|                      | Substance Drug Checking                                                                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University of Victoria Professor</li> <li>• Drug Checking Analysts</li> <li>• Training Developer &amp; Facilitator</li> <li>• Service Coordinator / Research Assistant</li> </ul> |
|                      | Tla'amin Nation                                                                                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Harm Reduction Coordinator</li> <li>• Health Director</li> </ul>                                                                                                                  |
|                      | University of British Columbia (UBC) Okanagan HaRT                                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drug Checking Team Lead</li> <li>• Drug Checking Technician</li> </ul>                                                                                                            |
|                      | Vancouver Coastal Health                                                                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Medical Health Officer</li> <li>• Drug Checking Technician</li> <li>• Regional Harm Reduction Lead</li> <li>• Project Manager</li> </ul>                                          |
|                      | Whistler Community Services Society                                                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outreach Supervisor</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                    |
| New Brunswick        | ENSEMBLE                                                                                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lead Overdose Prevention Site Coordinator</li> </ul>                                                                                                                              |
| Nova Scotia          | Direction 180, Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre                                                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ReFix Coordinator</li> <li>• Program Manager</li> </ul>                                                                                                                           |
| Ontario              | Parkdale Queen West Community Health Centre                                                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Harm Reduction Coordinator / Drug Checking Lead</li> <li>• Trip! Project Coordinator</li> </ul>                                                                                   |
|                      | Toronto's Drug Checking Service                                                                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manager</li> <li>• Lead</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                |
| Prince Edward Island | PEERS Alliance                                                                                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overdose Prevention Site Project Manager</li> </ul>                                                                                                                               |
| Quebec               | Association des intervenants en dépendance du Québec (AIDQ) / Drug Resource and Education (DRED) Project | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responsable, contenus et valorisation de la pratique</li> </ul>                                                                                                                   |
|                      | Dopamine                                                                                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drug checking analyst</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                  |
|                      | Élixir                                                                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intervenante en prévention des dépendances</li> </ul>                                                                                                                             |
|                      | Groupe de recherche et d'Intervention psychosociale (GRIP) Montreal                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agent of Research &amp; Development</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                    |
|                      | IRIS Estrie                                                                                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordinator of an Overdose Prevention Site</li> </ul>                                                                                                                             |



|              |                                                       |                                                                                                                                    |
|--------------|-------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|              | L'Anonyme                                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Coordinator of the Proximity Program</li><li>• Agent de soutien de programme</li></ul>     |
|              | Oasis Unité Mobile                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Community Worker</li><li>• Coordinator</li></ul>                                           |
|              | Spectre de rue                                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Project Manager, Drug Checking Service</li><li>• Drug Checker</li></ul>                    |
| Saskatchewan | Prairie Harm Reduction                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Paramedic</li></ul>                                                                        |
| Yukon        | Blood Ties Four Directions Centre                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Harm Reduction Coordinator</li></ul>                                                       |
| National     | Health Canada Drug Analysis Service                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Chemist II</li><li>• Manager, Strategic Research and Science Direction</li></ul>           |
|              | Public Health Agency of Canada                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Manager</li></ul>                                                                          |
|              | Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• National Drug Checking Working Group (NDCWG) Co-Chair</li><li>• Knowledge Broker</li></ul> |



## Drug Checking Symposium Program Booklet



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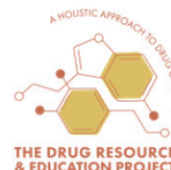
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