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1000 word part of chapter: 'Policy and practice in harm reduction – in Australia'  
'Internet, digital media, and newer synthetic drugs'

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In Australia, as in other nations, there are two emergent issues which pose particular challenges and opportunities for harm reduction. Recognised as such by Australia's most recent National Drug Strategy (Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy, 2011), these are the increased use of internet and digital technologies and the increasing growth in the number of new synthetic drugs. Australian practitioners have taken advantage of the opportunities presented by high levels of internet use (over 90% of 15-34 year olds, see Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009) by developing innovative online interventions for treatment of problem drug use (Swan & Tyssen, 2009), and projects that build resilience in young people's lives (Burns, Davenport, Durkin, Luscombe, & Hickie, 2010; Burns, Ellis, Mackenzie, & Stephens-Reicher, 2009). The challenges of increased internet and digital media use include the sale of new synthetic drugs with unknown legal status, the provision of information on illegal drug manufacture and use, and the existence of a largely unregulated space where alcohol and tobacco are promoted (Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy, 2011).

As a response, Federal legislation is currently proposed in Australia that would mandate Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to block a list of 'refused classification' websites (Bennett Moses, 2010; Langos, 2010). In addition to sites allowing access to child pornography, this would target media that "depict, express or otherwise deal with matters of... drug misuse or addiction" and/or "promote, incite or instruct in matters of crime" which may be refused classification, subject to the extent to which they would 'offend reasonable adults', under the *Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Act 1995 (Cth)*. Currently, websites hosted in Australia that are refused classification are issued with a take-down notice, but all other websites remain outside Australia's legal jurisdiction. The proposed legislation seeks to create parity between online and offline content regulation (Bennett Moses, 2010). Worryingly from a harm reduction perspective, independent research has found that the scope of refused classification will be wide enough to encompass online content aimed at promoting safer drug practices through the provision of detailed use instructions (Lumby, Green, & Hartley, 2009). As at June 2011, the definition of 'refused classification' is under review (McClelland & O'Connor, 2011).

A significant proportion of Australian drug users access drug-related information through websites (Bleeker et al., 2009; Duff, Johnston, Moore, & Goren, 2007; Gascoigne, Dillon, & Copeland, 2004; Johnston et al., 2006). One example of a website popular among Australians is pillreports.com, a site that enables peers to post reviews of ecstasy pills in their local area including experience reports and reagent testing results. Unlike some European countries, Australia does not have an official illicit tablet monitoring system that provides information to users (see Hales, 2009), meaning that pillreports.com, to some extent, fills this information void although the information is sometimes less-than-reliable. The content and purity of tablets sold as ecstasy is just one example where there is a dearth of relevant and detailed harm reduction information available from more official sources. Government sponsored websites generally offer simple fact sheets, but rarely provide the detailed instructional information that is available peer-to-peer via public online forums where drugs are discussed. In the case of the newer synthetic drugs such as mephedrone and

synthetic cannabinoids, internet forums tend to be the first and only sources of available information when new drugs first emerge (e.g., mephedrone in 2007 in Australia, see Camilleri, Johnston, Brennan, Davis, & Caldicott, 2010). The ability to remain relatively anonymous, to connect with other like-minded drug users to discuss experiences, and access information that is not otherwise available attracts people to online contexts over and above traditional information channels (Barratt, 2011). At present, the public nature of drug discussion forums used by Australian drug users allows researchers and authorities to monitor emerging drug trends in this country. However, this could change dramatically if, as is proposed, web filtering of drug websites occurs at the Internet Service provider (ISP) level, which would likely simply shift such conversations from public to private networks.

New synthetic drugs have not undergone official review in Australia as they have in the EU (EMCDDA, 2009, 2011; European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2011; Europol–European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), 2010). Legible local information is available upon which to base scheduling decisions. Drug possession and supply laws are under state jurisdiction in Australia, which means that there is a wide range of laws across our eight states and territories. Whilst some call for standardising Australian drug laws nationally to avoid such complications, uniform drug laws across the country would curtail the ability of individual states and territories to implement and evaluate drug law reforms (see Room, Fischer, Hall, Lenton, & Reuter, 2010). Synthetic drug manufacturers find ways around these schedules through marketing their products as ‘not for human consumption’ or by changing the chemical compounds to a variation that is not prohibited under existing schedules. In a recent example, the synthetic cannabinoid *Kronic* was recently scheduled in Western Australia. Within days, the same company began offering a new formulation of *Kronic* that they claimed was then legal in WA.

There is preliminary evidence that the prohibition of new synthetic drugs may have increased harm to some users, while not achieving any meaningful change in the availability of similar drugs to those who seek them. There is no incentive or requirement for companies to provide information to potential users about the active ingredients or about safer ways to consume the product and users are unlikely to know what the product actually contains. In Australia this issue is of particular relevance because of a shortage of imported MDMA, claimed by law enforcement as due to successful interdiction of precursors in South East Asia (Australian Crime Commission, 2010). Ongoing demand for MDMA-like substances provides a market opportunity for companies selling MDMA alternatives. Similarly, the increase in drug testing policies for Australian mine workers (Holland, 2003) has provided a market for synthetic cannabinoids as a replacement for cannabis which, until recently, have been unable to be detected by workplace drug testing technologies. While MDMA and cannabis have known harms, their newer replacements are even less studied and known. In these cases, well-intended drug policy decisions have led to use of new drugs with unknown potential for harm. How Australia responds to the increasing emergence of new synthetic drugs and the intersection of drug issues with new technologies will be major determinants of the country’s success in reducing drug-related harm into the future.

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