

Substance Drug Checking

Still not a bad batch: Responding to the Coroners Numbers Ad Infinitum



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Photo by Jay Wallace

Every month, year after year, the British Columbia Coroners Service releases the numbers of illicit drug-related deaths in the province and every month they are grim. The month of November, like the month before it and the month before that, is another month of witnessing the horrific impacts of a failed war on drugs and the people who use them.

Every month, the crisis is demarked by more preventable deaths in the province. Every month, our Project is asked to comment and every month, we respond with the same message: the illicit supply is unpredictable, volatile, and quite frankly, deadly. Every month, we hear the same promises from those who have the power to enact change, yet every month, little does; if anything, it gets worse. Every single month we mourn the loss of our friends, families, and communities. Every month, we grieve the thousands who have been lost through this crisis.

Like most people responding to the ongoing crisis, we are tired of repeating the same message over and over again: *the unregulated supply is the problem*. The answers to the overdose crisis have been laid out before us time and time again by those most impacted, yet those who have the power to end the crisis do not seem to be listening, or worse, do not seem to care. As we have previously pointed out, the answer to an unpredictable supply is quite simple; the answer is a predictable supply where components and doses are known. After all, a stable supply is a safe supply.

Like the seemingly endless overdose advisories put out by Public Health, the Coroners reports serve to remind us that little can change unless the supply itself does, or unless there are sufficient alternatives to it. Of course, the supply is always morphing to respond to the needs of the market and the challenges of prohibition, and every month, the supply is consistently inconsistent. In November, for example, we found fentanyl in samples ranging from 7% to 35% with additives like carfentanil, etizolam, flubromazepam, fluorofentanyl, xylazine and the latest additions to enter the supply on Vancouver Island, nitazenes. To make things worse, 82% of opioid samples we tested in November contained etizolam and/or benzodiazepines ranging from 3% to well over 25%. What these numbers show is that the unregulated opioid supply in Victoria is absolutely fucked and it is this supply that continues to ensure that people who use drugs, short of getting their drugs checked or accessing safer alternatives, are left with no quality controls and no ways of knowing what is in their drugs. This is, as it has always been, completely unacceptable.

Most consumables in Canada have ingredient lists so that consumers can respond to their own needs and desires. Most consumables in Canada have quality controls that ensure continuity and predictability in the supply. It is long past time that we extend this benefit to drugs and the people who use them. We can continue responding to Coroners reports every month with messages highlighting the unpredictability of the supply just as we continue feeling the deep pangs every time the numbers are released. We can continue the message box *ad infinitum*, but we do not want to. If the current government is serious about ending this crisis, they know what must be done. The movement of people who use drugs that has been desperately calling for options outside of the illicit supply for so long has the answers. Short of a safe supply of drugs that is widely accessible and responsive to the needs of people who use drugs, the responses continue to be just a trivial attempt at trying to care. We deserve so much more than the current responses that define this crisis; we deserve better, this month, and every month.