

Case 8

In 1999 Emanuel Sferios founded DanceSafe, an organization whose purpose is "promoting health and safety within the rave and nightclub community." In addition to dispensing free earplugs, condoms, and information on recreational drugs, DanceSafe also provides free (and anonymous) testing of (alleged) Ecstasy.

Ecstasy, also known as MDMA (methylenedioxyamphetamine), X, and E, affects the brain's production of serotonin, a neurotransmitter that regulates mood, memory, sleep, and body temperature. But unlike other drugs that stabilize serotonin levels on a continuous basis (e.g. antidepressants such as Prozac and Zoloft), Ecstasy floods the brain with serotonin. This deluge of serotonin creates a "high," but can also lead to dangerous dehydration, overheating, muscle spasms, and seizures.

Pill testing is DanceSafe's response to Ecstasy's growing popularity with ravers. Americans buy close to one million doses a week at \$20 to \$30 apiece. The popularity and price had led to fake or adulterated pills. At best, fake Ecstasy pills are harmless (e.g. Excedrin, whose tablets are marked with an "E" have been sold as Ecstasy). However, pills can be dangerous if other, more toxic, substances are substituted.

Sferios reports that screening has revealed alleged Ecstasy pills that actually contained caffeine, antacid, over-the-counter sleeping pills and pain relievers. Other pills contained speed, and other life threatening drugs. In 1999 an unusually large number of ravers, having taken what they thought was Ecstasy, wound up in emergency rooms. The pills contained dextromethorphan (DXM), a common ingredient in cough suppressants. DXM can cause convulsions.

DanceSafe's test identifies the presence or absence of Ecstasy, as well as the presence of speed and several other drugs. If the test demonstrates the presence of Ecstasy, the pill's owner is given a laminated white sheet that reads: "This test produced a normal reaction. It means the pill contains an Ecstasy-like substance. It does not mean the pill is 'safe.' There could still be something else in this pill."

Critics charge that drug testing encourages drug use, but Sferios disagrees. He argues that most ravers are going to take their drugs anyway, so free and anonymous testing enables users to make an informed choice. Thus, Sferios sees DanceSafe as a part of the growing harm-reduction movement, which emphasizes drug education, rather than abstinence or criminalization. He compares pill testing to another risk-reduction program -- needle exchanges, that minimize the risk of HIV infection risk for IV drug users.