



## Secretary

Department of Health

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Janet Lee  
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Coroners Court of Victoria  
**Via e-mail:** [cpuresponses@coronerscourt.vic.gov.au](mailto:cpuresponses@coronerscourt.vic.gov.au)

Dear Ms Lee

Thank you for providing the findings of Coroner Ingrid Giles dated 4 December 2025 into the death of Raymond John Flaherty. I offer my condolences to Mr Flaherty's family and loved ones.

Coroner Giles made three recommendations, each of which are directed to the Department of Health (the department). They are as follows.

- (i) *That the Secretary of the Victorian Department of Health commission the Chief Addiction Medicine Advisor to investigate the risks presented by the expanding availability of novel and counterfeit benzodiazepines in unregulated drug markets and consider what initiatives may be needed to address these risks and reduce harms associated with use of these substances (**Recommendation 1**).*
- (ii) *That the Secretary of the Victorian Department of Health commission the Chief Addiction Medicine Advisor to undertake appropriate consultation to determine whether there is a need for a specific strategy to:*
  - a. *reach people who are using novel and counterfeit benzodiazepines accessed via unregulated drug markets; and*
  - b. *provide them information and education about risks presented by these substances, the role of drug checking in learning what substances contain, and pathways to treatment and support if they wish to address their use of benzodiazepines (**Recommendation 2**).*
- (iii) *That the Secretary of the Victorian Department of Health consult with specialist services and stakeholders (such as Reconnexion) on what would be needed to support an enhanced Victorian health system response to novel and illegal benzodiazepine use and related harms (**Recommendation 3**).*

The department supports each of Coroner Giles' recommendations in principle and will consider them further for the purposes of forward planning and its future work. I note that the Chief Addiction Medicine Advisor (CAMA) is part of the executive team within the department's Mental Health and Wellbeing Division.

My responses below outline the work the department is already undertaking to address novel and unregulated benzodiazepines, and areas of future interest for the department.

## Recommendation 1

The department is committed to preventing and reducing drug-related harm, including the risk posed by counterfeit pharmaceuticals such as illicit and novel benzodiazepines. The department actively monitors the trend of increasing novel benzodiazepine use in the Victorian community as well as its prevalence in unregulated drug markets both within Australia and abroad.

In the past 12 months, the CAMA has liaised with key stakeholders on the increased prevalence of novel benzodiazepines in Victoria. The CAMA has discussed potential strategies for better identifying the nature of the substances, often sold as “Xanax” in the illicit market, with the department. The key stakeholders consulted include Harm Reduction Victoria, Reconnexion and the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine. Through this consultation, the CAMA and, more broadly, the department have gained a greater understanding of the risks presented by novel and unregulated benzodiazepines.

The department is also currently implementing the recently [published Victorian Alcohol and Other Drug \(AOD\) Strategy 2025-2035](#). This strategy includes the following two relevant objectives from Focus Area 2: Harm Reduction, Treatment and System Design:

- 2.1.3: Strengthen Victoria’s early warning system to identify changes in drug markets and trends, enabling timely public health advice and appropriate system responses.
- 2.1.4: Continue to expand proactive overdose prevention and response initiatives, including peer-based initiatives.

These objectives support the department in investigating the risks posed by the increasing availability of unregulated novel and counterfeit benzodiazepines, and in considering what initiatives are required to address these risks and associated harms. Relevantly, the department:

- uses the early warning system to produce drug alerts which assist in alerting those using novel and unregulated benzodiazepines to potential risks (for example, a [drug alert](#) published in 2022 concerning high potency benzodiazepine tablets). Victoria’s early warning system is critical to tracking benzodiazepine use and harm patterns in Victoria and provides targeted public health advice to inform effective system responses; and
- has invested in drug monitoring programs that monitor the use of novel benzodiazepines such as bromazolam. Through the Victorian Pill Testing Service, Victorians can test substances free of charge, and receive non-judgmental health and harm reduction advice.

## Recommendation 2

The department undertakes a variety of work to reach people using unregulated novel and counterfeit benzodiazepines and to provide them with information, education, support and pathways to treatment.

Since 1987, the department has funded Reconnexion, a service of EACH (formerly known as Eastern Access Community Health), that provides specialist, statewide support for Victorians with benzodiazepine issues. This includes benzodiazepine reduction and withdrawal

counselling, a benzodiazepine support line, specialist clinical education, as well as development of educational materials, training for health professionals and secondary consultations.

The department also funds Turning Point, a treatment, education and research centre for addiction. As a part of this funding, Turning Point hosts the AOD Pathways Program, a statewide service that facilitates support for those seeking addiction treatment who have had issues accessing residential treatment options. The AOD Pathways Program delivers a Community of Practice that responds to emerging trends of drug use and harm through shaping clinical knowledge and practice.

Further, the department funds specialist AOD services to provide assessment and treatment for those struggling with addiction issues, including supported withdrawal for people who are seeking assistance for benzodiazepine use. These services offered by the department include services for young people who may be seeking treatment for benzodiazepine use.

### **Recommendation 3**

The department, with input from the CAMA, is considering arrangements to strengthen how emerging substance use trends in the Victorian community are identified and investigated. This involves exploring mechanisms that would enable timely assessment and responses to new drug trends in the community, including potential patterns of benzodiazepine use. Strengthening this capability to respond to drug trends would support a more coordinated and effective Victorian health system response to novel and illegal benzodiazepine use and harms, as well as other emerging substance use trends.

I trust this response is of assistance to the Court.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Jenny Atta', with a stylized flourish at the end.

**Jenny Atta PSM**  
Secretary

5/03/2026