Drugged and dangerous

Giving Police the power to catch drugged drivers
A hidden killer

How safe would you feel if a driver coming towards you at 100km/h was stoned?

The reality is that right now there is very little stopping someone from using drugs and then getting behind the wheel. The Automobile Association thinks that needs to change.

Australia has been doing roadside drug testing for more than a decade and the UK introduced it in 2015. It is past time that New Zealand followed suit to fight what the AA sees as "a hidden killer on our roads".

The largest study done into drugged driving in New Zealand found nearly 1 in 3 of the drivers who died in a crash had some type of impairing drug in their system – mainly cannabis.

Crashes involve multiple factors so it would be wrong to say that drugs alone were the reason for all of these crashes but two things are clear: drugs impair people's driving ability and a disproportionate number of the people who crash have drugs in their system.

We need to do more to stop this and 94% of AA Members support saliva-based drug testing being introduced.

The AA is calling on the next Government to give Police the technology to test and catch drugged drivers.

Analysis of blood samples from 1046 deceased NZ drivers*

- 52% No alcohol or drugs
- 35% Drugs (both with and without alcohol)
- 13% Alcohol alone

Number of drugged drivers caught in NZ in 2016: 405
Number of drugged drivers caught in Victoria in 2016: 8700

1 in 3 drivers who died in a crash had potentially impairing drugs in their system*

Over 1 in 4 drivers hospitalised from a crash had potentially impairing drugs in their system*

* 2010 and 2011 ESR studies into alcohol and other drug use in NZ drivers
Testing works

In every state of Australia the Police are able to use roadside saliva-based testing devices to check for the presence of several drugs. These tests are slower to complete and cost more than an alcohol breath test so they are used in a targeted fashion but they have been in use for more than a decade. Some Australian states are now conducting more than 100,000 tests a year.

The United Kingdom introduced saliva-based roadside drug testing in 2015 and during the first Christmas period 50% of the drivers tested were found to be positive, reflecting a well targeted approach from Police.

New Zealand can do the same.

NZ’s current approach

If a Police officer has “good cause to suspect” a driver is on drugs they can require them to do a physical impairment test.

This test is:

- Walking and turning
- Standing on one leg
- An examination of their pupils

A driver who fails this test can be temporarily forbidden from driving and asked to provide a blood sample to test for drugs.

These tests can take a lot of Police time and resource that is hard to spare, so few are done.

94% of AA Members supported the introduction of saliva-based drug testing in 2017 surveys

100,000+ drug tests in Victoria in 2016

8700 were positive

38% of drivers and motorcyclists killed in Victoria in 2016 had illegal drugs in their system
Giving Police the technology to test and catch drugged drivers is the third of the AA’s 2017 Election Calls.

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Confronting cannabis

Imagine Eden Park in Auckland, Westpac Stadium in Wellington, AMI Stadium in Christchurch and Forsyth Barr Stadium in Dunedin all full of people at the same time.

Well that is how many New Zealanders say they use cannabis at least once a week, according to the 2015 Ministry of Health cannabis use survey. It estimates more than 130,000 people in the country are regular users of the drug and 1 in 3 cannabis users say they have driven stoned.

Some cannabis users believe they drive safer and slower when stoned but the drug negatively affects people’s perceptions and reaction times, leading to a doubling of crash risk.

Adding other drugs into the mix

A little known danger with cannabis is that the impairment effects skyrocket if it is combined with alcohol or other drugs. Even a small amount of alcohol plus cannabis equals extreme risk on the roads.

Methamphetamine is one of the worst drugs for dangerously affecting drivers but the bulk of the analysis into drugged driving in New Zealand was done before the country was hit by the P epidemic.

Not just illegal drugs

Prescription medications can also pose a risk on our roads. There are an increasing number of people taking medicines that can impair their driving such as strong painkillers, sedatives, heart medication and anxiety or depression treatments but the risks from these are not well recognised. Again, if mixed with alcohol, the result can be extreme impairment.

130,000 New Zealanders use cannabis at least once a week

1 in 3 cannabis users drive stoned

1 in 4 prescriptions are for medications that can impair driving