

Keeping Coachella healthy

■ A doctor at the yearly festival finds drugs to be the biggest problem.

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Every year, Coachella Music and Arts Festival in Indio encompasses music, art and fashion for approximately 125,000 guests. Holding an event of this size certainly involves risks when drugs and high desert temperatures are two main variables.

Dr. Stuart Finkelstein, one of the leading physicians of the Coachella medical staff with a practice in Lakewood, has had years of experience working with famous musicians and touring with artists such as Michael Jackson and the Rolling Stones.

According to Finkelstein, the heat during festivals can amplify the effects of drugs and lead to more severe symptoms. Overdoses can be either from a patient consuming too much or being unaware of what they were taking.

“This year I saw a tremendous amount of people taking LSD and ecstasy at the same time. Everyone at the festival wants to get high and they either take too much or don’t know what they are getting or who they are even getting it from” Finkelstein said.

It can be difficult to encapsulate the experience that Coachella and other music festivals alike provide. While the experience is positive for many, it inevitably carries a dark side driven by drug use, making festivals more of a liability and harder to manage as they grow.

Finkelstein feels the Coachella staff is well equipped to handle medical crises and for years have been effectively providing care to its guests.

The rave and music festival scene is said by many to have once been taboo and didn’t qualify as mainstream. This has taken quite the opposing stance as people will now go through great lengths and spend hundreds of dollars on musical festivals for a chance to experience the hype.



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Photo by Kassidy Dillon

Coachella organizers are prepared for medical emergencies during the music festival. This year the staff saw a lot of attendees using LSD and ecstasy at the same time.

Whether or not drugs are the focal point of music festivals is a topic that could easily be argued. Despite the portion of sober festival goers, music festivals and raves undoubtedly attract a large recreational drug use scene.

The medical safety at each festival differs immensely and given that a majority of popular ones take place in some of the hottest months of the year, they require extensive preparation in order to make it through a weekend without experiencing severe dehydration or in some cases, a drug overdose.

Despite safety concerns in regards to drug use and heat, Coachella exceeds the expectations of medical preparation and errs strongly on the side of caution when it comes to treating patients at the festival.

Coachella has medical tents set up in every quadrant of the Empire Polo grounds with around the clock EMTs and doctors. The festival has additional water refill stations located throughout the venue as well as air conditioned tents to escape the brutal heat.

It is nearly impossible for any festival or concert to halt all drugs from entering the venue, however Coachella does what it can to ensure the safety of its attendees and encourage guests to seek help through the medical staff if they need it.

Finkelstein has attended Coachella every year since 1999 when the festival began and has since worked backstage as a medical consultant to performers as well as the behind-the-stage staff and crew.

"Coachella is extremely commendable for how much they spend on safety and preparing for medical problems," Finkelstein said. "Most commonly kids are in the medical tents for either dehydration, seizing from the heat and especially taking too much ecstasy which can cause seizures from hyponatremia, meaning low sodium levels."

According to Finkelstein, the chief operating officer of Goldenvoice, Skip Paige, is constantly revising the medical system at the festival to continue improving its efficiency and does what he can to give back to the Coachella Valley community.

"About a month before the event, Skip Paige opens a pre-health care clinic available for impoverished people and indigents in the area with no healthcare as a way of giving back," Finkelstein said. "They put a lot of money into supporting that clinic."

Aside from medical attention being readily available to all Coachella guests, Finkelstein and others on the medical staff work hard to keep artists and their crews as healthy as possible.

"Most of the time I am backstage with artists helping them with whatever they need medically before they go on stage in case of catastrophes," Finkelstein said. "So many musicians have drug or alcohol problems and we actually have 12-step meetings and a 'music cares' booth available backstage for them to get through the festival and support each other."