



FOCUS

Community workers debate ideas to curb heroin overdoses

Controversial safe-injection sites advocated by federal NDP MP

BY JAMIE WOODS

VANCOUVER (CUP) — Walking into the meeting centre for the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users, the first-time visitor will quickly notice three things.

The first thing will be the line-up, roughly 20 people deep, waiting to receive the evening's bus fare. Next will be the funk and disco lines coming from the stereo — the James Brown, the Kool and the Gang, and the smell of incense.

Finally, it will be the two black coffins in the corner, both with white slogans painted onto them. The first says: "Almost 2000 people have OD'd since 1992." The second asks: "Who is the next OD victim?"

Every Saturday afternoon at the corner of Jackson and Powell in Vancouver's downtown eastside, about 100 people gather for ham sandwiches, no-name cola, some laughs and some heavy conversation. Recently, on Halloween weekend, the tone was comparatively light-hearted. Jokes about people's neighbours and the Vancouver Canucks could be overheard.

Only a couple weeks earlier, however, former Vancouver Police chief Ken Higgins visited the centre to conduct a workshop to get the group talking about what they wanted to see change in the troubled area.

A poll was taken. Nine people said they wanted to see guest fees in single residence occupancy hotels eliminated. That way, fewer people would be left shooting up by themselves, and the danger of overdosing would be reduced.

Seventeen others said they wanted to see 911 boxes installed in the area to make up for the coin boxes that have been removed due to vandalism.

Other proposals included adding more 24-hour washrooms and drug-testing sites on the streets, and stopping police from driving their cars onto the sidewalk to clear suspected drug activity.

But of all the proposals, the most popular one was the idea of safe-injection sites.

David, a heroin user who's lived in the area for six years, is among those who believe strongly in the idea. He has three reasons why. In this past week alone, that's exactly the number of family members he's lost to overdoses.

"I lost three people in my family for that shit, but I still use it," he said. "When anyone does it, it's Russian Roulette. We need a safe place where somebody can go shoot."

"Going through difficult experiences is one of the reasons people turn to drugs," said Bud Osborn, a poet and outreach worker in the downtown eastside.

"One of the main things to remember is that 90 percent of the people [addicted to heroin] come from trauma and abuse early in their lives," said Osborn.

"It's not so much an attempt to get high, but a way to reduce the

pain."

Osborn is one of several experts calling for a new approach to the way British Columbians view and treat hard drug addicts. Rather than seeing the issue as one of law-enforcement, Osborn says it's time a "harm reduction" approach is taken to drug addiction.

"In BC we're basically saying [to addicts], 'we'd rather you die than have you hope to live.' None of the initiatives we've got now will do anything to reduce the number of deaths."

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province who die of a drug overdose has been climbing steadily for the past 10 years. In 1988, 39 people died from overdosing and nine years later, in 1997, the number reached 310.

Experts warn 1998 promises to be even worse. By Aug. 21, 254 British Columbians had already died, surpassing the previous year's total on the same day by 60.

What Osborn and other experts are stressing is that it doesn't have to be that way.

Simin Tabrizi, a consultant for Health Canada, travelled through Switzerland, Germany and the Netherlands earlier this year and compiled a report on what certain European cities had done for their drug using populations.

In Frankfurt, drug overdose deaths have fallen from 147 in 1991 to 31 in 1997. The decrease can be attributed to safe-injection sites and a heroin maintenance program for chronic addicts.

The Swiss government has gone even further. From 1994 to 1997, the government ran a pilot program where addicts were given medically-prescribed narcotics. In a

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study released last year, the researchers behind the program concluded it had resulted in significant improvements in health, social integration, and labour-force participation. They also said the economic benefits had been significant.

For those reasons, Tabrizi said she'd like to see the harm-reduction approach brought to Vancouver.

"I'd like to see a well-coordinated network that would include detox on demand, much expanded counselling, a much expanded methadone program, and a network of support programs that address all of their life circumstances from housing to nutritional needs."

Osborn has a slightly different take on harm reduction. He says the number one priority has to be saving as many lives as possible, as quickly as possible. Therefore, he says, safe-

injection sites have to be the top priority.

"Drug users I talk to and know are speaking for safe injection sites. For them it's a matter of life and death," he said.

But despite the push from outreach and community workers like Osborn, there's been strong resistance to the idea of safe-injection sites.

Intriguingly, that resistance has come from none other than the agencies working in the downtown eastside.

John Turvey, who runs a

needle-exchange site at the Downtown Eastside Youth Activity Society, is one of those against the idea. His concern is that the community won't be able to handle safe-injection sites.

"Eighty percent of the addicts aren't from here [the downtown eastside]," he said. "So the impact on this, the poorest postal code in Canada with the least likely capacity to deal with this... We're going to end up attracting them and entrenching them here in the community. And this community just doesn't have the capacity to deal with that."

He also said safe-injection would lead to further ghettoization.

"It fuels the kind of containment mentality where they used to take anybody with 'social problems,' whether you were a sex trade worker or an addict, and keep you within the pound."

Turvey said rather than safe-injection sites, he'd prefer to see doctors trained specifically to deal with addiction and given the ability to prescribe injection drugs. But he's quick to point out that even that wouldn't solve the whole problem.

"There's the whole thing of cocaine as the leading overdose thing. It's cocaine and alcohol, so just the operational dynamics of assuming that everybody's going to come and inject in a safe fixing site is erroneous.

"If you smoke or snort or fix cocaine, then you go have a beer, it forms cocoethanol, and it's toxic. And [by then] you're out of the safe-fixing site."

Osborn disagrees with Turvey's position, and said he's confronted him on the issue. He doesn't buy Turvey's argument that safe-injection sites will lead to other problems.

"They have not created significant enough other problems where they have been implemented to warrant that argument, he said.

The real reason some community groups aren't behind the

idea is that they don't want to represent drug users," Osborn contends.

"The years that I've been involved in some of the boards of these organizations, I've never seen the slightest bit of interest in defending the lives of the people at the bottom, the people who are most vulnerable and afflicted in this community," he said.

While the debate over safe-injection sites continues in the downtown eastside, 10 miles and worlds away a New Democratic Party member explains why he's pitched the idea to the party's provincial council, the grass-roots wing of the party composed of riding association presidents.

Am Johal has written a motion to the council which, if passed, would mandate the provincial NDP government to open safe-injection sites and heroin-prescription trial centres in Vancouver. They will vote on the motion in early December.

Johal said he wants to give the issue a higher profile because it's a topic most politicians would rather not think about.

"These people are political pariahs," said Johal, who also helped organize a course that offers downtown eastside residents exposure to University of British Columbia curricula. "No politician is going to gain anything from supporting this issue."

But at least one federal politician has taken up the issue.

NDP MP Libby Davies has introduced a private member's bill in the House of Commons to have safe-injection sites introduced on a trial basis.

Johal said it's about time society acknowledged that drugs are a way of life for many people, and that they won't be going away.

"You look at the war against drugs, we've lost. It's not going to be stopped."