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Agenda Item: \_\_\_\_\_

**To:** Vancouver/Richmond Health Board

**From:** Health Planning

**Date:** January 15, 1998

**Agenda Topic:** HARM REDUCTION

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**ISSUE:**

Harm Reduction is a relatively new social policy that is gaining recognition throughout Europe and North America. Although Harm Reduction can be used as a framework to address all drugs including alcohol, it has primarily been applied to injection drug users as a means to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS.

The first priority of Harm Reduction is to decrease the negative consequences of drug use for the individual. As a strategy, Harm Reduction establishes a hierarchy of goals that ranges from reducing the immediate harm associated with use or consumption to abstinence should the individual choose to be drug free. For example, this hierarchy can range from a simple willingness to treat individuals currently using drugs or alcohol, encouraging 'safe practices' and providing clean needles and condoms to support for decriminalization or legalization.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

That the Vancouver/Richmond Health Board supports a Harm Reduction approach in reducing the spread of HIV/AIDS and other communicable diseases.

**BACKGROUND:**

**Current Practice at V/RHB**

The V/RHB has initiated a plan to integrate Harm Reduction philosophy and services at its service sites throughout the region. Harm Reduction services are also incorporated into home-based health service delivery.

Upon request, intravenous drug users will be provided with the opportunity to exchange needles, receive condoms and be offered 'safer sex' counseling and other health education supports. This will include information and referral to other community resources including drug and alcohol treatment services, medical care and testing and disease management for programs for HIV, TB, hepatitis and other communicable diseases.

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The three goals of the strategy are:

- prevent the transmission of HIV and other diseases through sexual contact or through shared needles,
- increase access to testing and care, treatment and support for people who may be HIV positive; and
- enhance community safety by decreasing the number of used and discarded needles in the community.

#### Developing Community Consensus for Harm Reduction

The introduction of Harm Reduction services, especially needle exchange by community health service staff, has raised some child welfare policy issues as interpreted by the Ministry for Children and Families. Because of our shared mandate for child and family health, any potential for conflicting policy impacts our ability to effectively help drug using parenting adults and youth to protect themselves and their partners. A current issue of concern centres on the apprehension of children whose parents use injection drugs.

V/RHB staff is now meeting with MCF regional staff, alcohol and drug workers and other health care providers to develop practice guidelines and service plans to provide staff with clearer direction and support.

The V/RHB recognizes the complexity and breadth of the debate around the decriminalization of drugs. The question will have far-reaching implications involving three levels of government, and remains a significant issue for the Board. Consequently, the V/RHB encourages and supports dialogue on the question of decriminalization. Further, the Board is willing to consider participation in clinical trials or pilot projects that may assist in resolving this issue.