

The First Supervised Injection Site In North America Opens

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The first Supervised Injection Site in North America feels more like a Photo gallery than a shooting gallery. There are pieces of art on the walls, and the first thing you notice is the aroma of brewing coffee floating in the air. There is a large room with very high ceilings and couches to sit on.

However there is no mistaking the true purpose of this room. Twelve injection cubicles surrounded by mirrors are on the other side of the room. Each cubicle has it's own sink and injection kit so the drug users can wash their hands. Unlike the filthy alleys outside that the drug users normally use. Canadian actor Nicholas Campbell when asked what he thought of the SIS (Supervised Injection Site) said, "Well I think it's a bold move. When you think that people are getting water from the back streets, this is a safe alternative."

The injection cubicles have mirrors for two purposes, one reason is so the drug users can see how they are injecting and for the nursing staff to monitor the injections and intervene if need be.

There are 16 medical staff who work shifts at the site 18 hours a day. There are currently 12,000 intravenous drug users in Vancouver.

After injecting the drug users go to the "chillout" room. Here they can sit and relax and have some of that brewing coffee that you can smell floating in the air as well as having a sandwich. There is literature on drug rehabilitation and there is a councillor to help with any questions the users may have.

This SIS was opened at 139 East Hastings street in Vancouver through the courage of former Vancouver Mayor Phillip Owen and current Vancouver Mayor Larry Campbell also Vancouver Coastal Health the Federal Government , and the non-stop efforts from Ann Livingston and Dean Wilson of Vancouver Area Network Of Drug Users.(VANDU)

For over Three years VANDU's Livingston and Wilson had been protesting City Hall and talking to the Vancouver Police trying to get a safe place for the drug users to use for safer injections. In 1999 Owen went to the Downtown Eastside to see first hand what was going on with the drug users. Owen talked with the drug users and he saw that something needed to be done. For three years, Owen tried to get a task force together. He pointed out that the cost of ambulance calls for drug overdoses in the Downtown Eastside from the previous year were close to \$500,000 and that amount could be eliminated if the drug overdoses were decreased.

In November 2001 Health Minister Allan Rock supported Owen and the vote for the task force was unanimous for the Four Pillars Drug Strategy. The strategy was harm reduction as the first step, then prevention as the second step followed by treatment and finally enforcement. This strategy paved the way for the first SIS in North America.

In March 2002 Owen was pushed out of his political party mainly because of his strong support for the Four Pillars Drug Strategy. Campbell then became Vancouver's Mayor.

In June 2003, Health Canada granted Vancouver Coastal Health an exemption under section 56 of the Controlled Drug Substances Act to set up the first Supervised Injection Sits in North America for a scientific pilot project. A site was secured at 139 East Hastings street in the Downtown Eastside. It was chosen for the proximity to the intravenous drug users and because of the permits and the amount of impact it would have in the area.

The B.C. Centre For Excellence which has been an advocacy group for HIV and Aids health issues since the 1990s was awarded the contract for the scientific research project. Dr. Carl Bognar from The B.C. Centre For Excellence says, " There are about 12,000 intravenous drug users in Vancouver right now and 30% are HIV and Aids patients The price of health care for one Aids patient each year is \$180,000 . If you add that up it's 3600 times \$180,000 that is a lot of money." The SIS will cut down on those figures The B.C.

Centre For Excellence will release their findings in six months. When asked about the research from other countries Bognar says, "It is all positive." Bognar believes that Vancouver's crime rate could be decreased because he says, "80% of crime in Vancouver is drug related. So there is a huge potential to cut crime through the opening of the SIS." Bognar is continuing his research from European countries. There are currently 27 countries that have safe injection facilities.

Vancouver Coastal Health's John Blatherwick said in a statement given for the Scientific Research Project CD that, "in the past five years there have been 524 deaths in the Downtown Eastside from drug overdoses. The population that will use this site are not usually reached. Hopefully the overdoses and infections will go down." Blatherwick further showed his support when he said, "the drug addicts need a safer place than the back alleys. The SIS will be a safe place for the addicts to inject. Blatherwick believes since the addicts are using the needle exchange program already, "they will more than likely use the SIS"

Not everyone supports the SIS. Bill Turner of Winners Foundation (an alcohol and substance abuse program in East Vancouver) has concerns with the hours of operation for the SIS. Turner says, "that's going to be a problem right there. They are actually defeating their purpose. Addicts don't stop using because the doors aren't open." Turner thinks that people who want help will go to the SIS but said, "most people don't want any help." There is currently a six month waiting period for addicts to enter a rehabilitation centre. Turner says, "addicts that do want help through rehabilitation, aren't going to wait six months. More access to rehab is what is needed. Turner agreed that the SIS will cut down on blood born diseases and HIV and Aids. Turners final statement was, "at least the government is doing something."

It was a long time coming but on Sept. 15th this year the SIS opened. Campbell was there and he thanked Owen and said, “ we couldn’t be here if it weren’t for the tireless work of my predecessor former Mayor Phillip Owen.”

Campbell warned everyone present “ not to expect changes over night.” He hopes to reduce the deaths from injection drug use through treatment and support.

Former drug addict Wilson from VANDU was clearly excited by the opening. He thanked Owen and his wife and children. “Today is a day of celebration.” he said. He warned , “ this injection site is not a silver bullet. The work is just beginning.” In ending he said, “ We did it guys, we did it.”

Vancouver Coastal Health , the Vancouver Police Department, The B.C. Centre For Excellence and VANDU believe that the SIS will reduce the spread of Aids and blood born diseases. Also the costs to Health Canada will be reduced. The SIS will further reduce deaths to intravenous drug users and the users will have access to information on rehabilitation centres.

Campbell when asked if this is a test pilot project how long will it be before it is considered to be a positive project, and if so when will another site be opened? said, “ there is no time frame on it. I said during the election I will put them wherever they need to be to address the problem.”