

Vancouver Supervised Injection Site Scientific (SIS) Research Pilot Project Proposal

A summary of the application to Health Canada for an exemption under Section 56 of the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act.

Vancouver Coastal Health Authority anticipates releasing the Vancouver Supervised Injection Site Scientific Research Pilot Project Proposal following approval from Health Canada. Until that time, the proposal will be considered a draft document. The following is a summary of the proposal, which was submitted for review on March 3, 2003.

Executive Summary

Introduction

Recognizing that supervised injection sites are a health resource necessary to the treatment of addiction and the improved health and safety of the residents of the Downtown Eastside (DTES) and Vancouver, the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority (VCHA), in partnership with the City of Vancouver and supporting organizations hopes to soon implement North America's first comprehensive supervised injection site (SIS) in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

The proposal to Health Canada begins from the premise that drug addiction is a serious health issue requiring a multi-faceted health solution, which should include supervised injection sites as well as options for addictions treatment. It incorporates the experience and best practice information from other supervised injection sites throughout the world, most notable the SIS in the King's Cross District of Sydney, Australia, as well as that of local experts representing Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, the City of Vancouver, the Vancouver Police Department, the BC Centre for Disease Control, and the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, among others. We gratefully acknowledge their contributions and insights.

The case for a SIS in Vancouver

In making the case for establishing a supervised injection site in Vancouver, the proposal highlights illicit drug activity and the impact of this activity:

An estimated 15,000 British Columbians inject illicit drugs (Millar, 1998). This estimate is likely conservative as it fails to include hundreds, perhaps thousands, of occasional users. An estimated 10% to 20% of these 15,000 live in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES). Injection drug use is associated with an array of severe health and social consequences for drug users, their families, and their communities. Rates of disease, death, and the accompanying costs are distressing indicators of drug-related harm experienced within our society (Fischer, Rehm, & Blitz-Miller, 2000). Over the past decade, problems resulting from injection drug use have grown exponentially.

Some of the specific and significant impacts of injection drug use on the Vancouver health system include:

- Increasing incidence and prevalence of infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS, hepatitis A, B, and C, and skin and blood-borne infections;
- High frequency of drug overdoses;
- Increasing hospital and emergency service utilization for treatment for HIV-related disease, septicemia, and endocarditis;
- Increasing emergency room visits and ambulance responses (including approximately 2,048 ambulance responses to drug overdoses in the Downtown Eastside in 1998);
- Increasing pressure on all community-level outreach, nursing, and medical services;
- Increasing need for community-level hospice palliative care; and
- Worsening consequences of associated conditions such as mental illness.

One part of the health solution

Drawing on information available from other sites throughout the world and the vision of what might be possible in Vancouver, the proposal explains the definition of a supervised injection site, what services one may offer, and what health outcomes might reasonably be expected from implementing one.

A supervised injection site (SIS) is a controlled health care setting where drug users inject drugs under supervision and receive health care, counseling, and referral to health and social services, including drug treatment. Vancouver's SIS will address the following objectives:

- Improve the overall health of drug users, including reducing the incidence of overdose and disease transmission;
- Reduce the harm associated with illicit drug use (e.g., crime, discarded needles, public drug use) that affects communities;
- Increase appropriate use of health and social services by drug users; and
- Reduce health, social, legal, and incarceration costs associated with drug use.

The Vancouver SIS will provide the following services:

- Supervision of injections including emergency response to drug overdoses;
- Injection-related first aid (such as wound and abscess care);
- Assessment and referral to primary health care and service providers;
- Harm reduction teaching and counseling; and
- Exchange of needles, condoms and other injecting equipment.

Health Canada criteria

As required under the Health Canada guidelines for application for an exemption under Section 56 of the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, the proposal provides a full description of the research protocol and outcome evaluation, and addresses operational issues such as site access procedures, security, staff training on the handling of controlled substances, record keeping procedures, and disposal of substances and equipment.

Evaluation

Recognizing that this proposal is for the creation of a scientific research pilot, it necessarily documents plans for evaluation, which aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To provide information to the program's management and staff that is useful in improving services and planning additional services;
- To determine the impact and cost-benefit of the intervention;
- To provide information—practical lessons learned—that will be useful to other organizations planning to start similar services elsewhere in Canada; and
- To increase understanding of the dynamics of intravenous drug users health status changes in relation to their health services utilization.

The proposal documents how data will be collected at regular intervals through interviews with clients, staff, and community members, as well as through use of external data sources including Coroners' and Ambulance Service records, BC Centre for Disease Control statistics, hospital records, and SIS operational databases.

The future of the supervised injection sites is not dependant on the outcome of the research protocol process. That process and the evaluation will, however, provide valuable information in confirming the level of impact the initiative is having on the community.

Recommended locations

The proposal also identifies two recommended locations for supervised injection sites. The first is at 135/139 East Hastings Street, a location that is currently leased by the Portland Hotel Society, a non-profit organization that would partner with the health authority in the implementation and operation of the supervised injection site. The second site recommended is the Dr. Peter Centre in downtown Vancouver, which would continue to serve the Centre's registered HIV/AIDS day health program clients.

Community Support

Beyond the formal operation, evaluation and research protocol, the proposal provides evidence of community support in the form of letters from many of the partners upon whom the success of this scientific research pilot will depend. These expressions of support come from:

- Chair of the Board of Directors, Vancouver Coastal Health Authority
- President and CEO, Vancouver Coastal Health Authority
- Mayor, City of Vancouver
- Chief Constable, Vancouver Police Department
- Director, BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS
- Director of STD/AIDS Control, BC Centre for Disease Control
- Chief Medical Health Officer, Vancouver Coastal Health Authority
- Nursing Practice Consultant, Registered Nurses Association of BC
- Vice President, Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU)
- Director, Harm Reduction Action Society

March 4, 2003