

The Harm Reduction Action Society

In March 2000, at five venues across Vancouver, more than 3,000 individuals attended harm reduction symposiums titled "Keeping the Door Open: Health Addictions and Social Justice." At the closing plenary there was a motion from the floor calling for participants to "take action to save lives." Out of these beginnings grew the Harm Reduction Action Society. The Society was incorporated under the Societies Act of British Columbia on May 4th, 2000. The Society's mission is:

To take harm reduction measures to save lives

From the outset, founding members committed to create a Society that includes individuals from a broad range of backgrounds who are concerned about the harm associated with drug use and the tragic impact it has on Canadian citizens, particularly Vancouver residents. At present, the membership of HRAS includes: a variety of health care professionals, researchers, and administrators; former and current drug users and their friends and families; community health activists; concerned citizens; and other representatives of allied community organizations, health care facilities and social service groups.

The Purposes of the Society are:

- To improve the quality of life for people who use drugs illicitly, and for their families, their friends and their communities;
- To provide harm reduction services, other health promotion services and health care services;
- To empower people who use drugs illicitly to live healthy, productive lives;
- To reduce harm associated with the prohibition of drugs;
- To change the laws regarding the prohibition of drugs;
- To promote public education and encourage activities that eliminate negative stereotyping of people who use drugs illicitly.

For more information about the Harm Reduction Action Society call: 646-5370
or email at: HRAS_Vancouver@Yahoo.ca

Some Frequently Asked Questions about Harm Reduction:

What is harm reduction?

The Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse defines harm reduction as "a policy or program directed toward decreasing the adverse health, social, and economic consequences of drug use without requiring abstinence from drug use." While harm reduction does not preclude abstinence as a worthwhile goal, it questions the long established notion that abstinence is the only acceptable drug policy or program outcome. A comprehensive harm reduction strategy typically includes needle exchanges, health rooms/safe injection sites, methadone and heroin maintenance programs, detox and treatment services.

Why does British Columbia need a harm reduction strategy now?

British Columbia has the highest rate of injection drug use in Canada. Vancouver has the highest rate of HIV and hepatitis C infection in the Western world. At present 25% of injection drug users in Vancouver have HIV/AIDS, and 88% have hepatitis C. Three other diseases that are currently occurring within this group at epidemic rates are tuberculosis, syphilis, and hepatitis A. Furthermore, with injection drug use comes high crime rates and millions of dollars wasted on associated health, legal and enforcement costs. Finally, research has shown that harm reduction works!

Why don't we just increase police enforcement and abstinence-based treatments?

One only has to look south of the border to see how ineffective a 'war on drugs' is. Research has shown again and again that enforcement does not work. In Malaysia people are put to death for using drugs. Does that discourage others from using drugs? No. A study from Switzerland shows that abstinence-based treatments enroll only 20% of drug users. In B.C., only 3% of those admitted to detoxification and treatment centres are not using after one year. Studies have shown that for every dollar spent on harm reduction, seven dollars are saved.

Does harm reduction work?

Yes! Frankfurt had a drug problem that was similar in many ways to the problems in Vancouver. In 1991 Frankfurt initiated a comprehensive harm reduction strategy. The Frankfurt Drug Squad provided the following crime statistics (from 1991-1997) following the implementation of a harm reduction strategy:

Car break-ins reduced by 43%	House break-ins reduced by 27%
Street robbery reduced by 28%	Heroin trafficking charges reduced by 65%
Police-registered first time consumers of hard drugs reduced by 39%	

According to research findings, additional benefits include:

- Fewer discarded needles found on streets;
- Reduced prevalence of HIV/AIDS;
- Fatal drug overdoses reduced (in Frankfurt by 82% from 1991 - 1997)
- Fewer public complaints about drug use.

"In Vancouver, the public discussion regarding drug use must move beyond the traditionally polarized debate on harm reduction approaches vs. abstinence-based approaches. It is clear from the European context that it is necessary to move forward on all fronts in order to have a significant impact on the number of individuals using drugs and on our inner city neighbourhoods. Efforts must be made to mediate this debate and move toward an acceptance of a broad range of services for drug users who wish to exit the drug scene and for those who are not ready to do so. The true objective of our strategies must be to reduce harm to our children, families and communities caused by drugs." (Donald McPherson, Social Planner, City of Vancouver)