

Calls for medically safe heroin mount in Canada

Canada is rapidly scaling up supervised injection facilities to tackle a surge in heroin overdoses. The move is welcomed by experts but several are calling for further measures. Paul C Webster reports.

Spurred by a huge spike in heroin overdose deaths last year in Canada, public health departments in five large cities are planning to open a series of medically supervised injection facilities. But the new injection facilities are an inadequate solution to Canada's suddenly surging overdose crisis, many expert observers say.

"If anything good comes from this disaster, it's the mainstreaming of supervised injection", explains Don MacPherson, head of the Canadian Drug Policy Coalition and a veteran architect of government harm reduction strategies. "But a lot of those who are dying would live if they have access to normalised, regulated substances. The next step must be heroin-assisted treatment."

Rick Lines, who heads Harm Reduction International, and Richard Elliott, head of Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, both agree that programmes ensuring users have access to medically safe heroin are urgently needed. "The newly commissioned safe injection facilities are a long overdue step", Elliott acknowledges. "But it comes far later than it should have. The government now needs to discuss decriminalising personal possession, and safe consumption services overall."

Although the distribution of heroin remains outlawed, the idea of a medically supervised alternative supply is not new in Canada. Researchers in Vancouver have been probing the idea for almost a decade, explains Eugenia Oviedo-Joekes, a researcher with the University of British Columbia who led two major trials that offered users safe opioid drugs. "There's an overwhelming body of sound science attesting to the need for a medically safe alternative to the drugs sold on the street", Oviedo-Joekes stresses. "We

should immediately stop users from injecting dirty stuff. Help them start using safe stuff. And go from there."

The statistics behind these calls are stark. According to the British Columbia Coroners Service, there were 755 "apparent illicit drug overdose deaths" between January and November, 2016, which represents a 70% increase over the number of deaths occurring during the same period in 2015. Most of these deaths occurred in Victoria, the provincial capital, and Vancouver and its suburbs.

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The Coroners Service ascribes this upswing to the growing role of fentanyl, an opioid up to 50 times more powerful than heroin that is being added to illicit heroin. The number of illicit drug overdose deaths excluding those in which fentanyl has been detected has remained relatively stable since 2011, the Coroners Service noted.

In Toronto, public health officials say the number of overdoses linked to fentanyl almost doubled to 42 last year, and that figure is expected to grow as the pattern in British Columbia spreads eastward across the country. In British Columbia, where two safe injection facilities have long operated, three additional facilities are being added. Toronto, Ottawa, and Montreal are also rushing to open several more facilities.

"It's a step in the right direction", says Toronto emergency physician Aaron Orkin, "but the problem is that most of the people dying have little interaction with the health system". Orkin, who treats people addicted to drugs in a men's shelter as well as in a hospital emergency ward, says access to safe substances is urgently needed. "We need to get people care on their own terms."

The proliferation of new safe injection facilities has come under a Liberal Canadian Government elected in October, 2015. Under the previous Conservative government, supervised injection was fiercely contested in the courts, and a law all-but banning the facilities was passed in 2015.

Meanwhile, the scientific case for supervised injection continues to grow as studies have confirmed they play important roles in reducing overdoses and HIV transmission, notes Carol Strike, a University of Toronto addictions and HIV researcher who coauthored a 2012 report recommending Toronto and Ottawa follow Vancouver's lead in establishing facilities. "Given that people often don't know what types of opioid they are taking and it is difficult to control or eliminate access in order to prevent overdoses, it's also time to scale up prescription heroin."

In November, 2016, the federal government convened a summit with groups including several provincial and territorial health ministries, regulatory organisations, and physician associations. It resulted in a consensus statement that "the growing number of overdoses and deaths related to the use of opioids is a national public health emergency. Solutions must address not only the immediate crisis of poisonings and overdoses, but also the underlying causes of opioid addiction." Since then, the federal government has signalled its intention to scrap the law that all-but bans safe injection facilities.

Oviedo-Joekes urges far more dramatic action from all levels of government. "There has to be more options for people who are street users. We need to be more brave and supply them with medical injectables."

Paul C Webster



For the trials led by Eugenia Oviedo-Joekes see *N Engl J Med* 2009; **361**: 777-786 and *JAMA Psychiatry* 2016; **73**: 447-45

For the 2016 summit consensus statement see <http://www.healthycanadians.gc.ca/healthy-living-vie-saine/substance-abuse-toxicomanie/opioids-opioides/conference-cadre/statement-declaration-eng.php>