

Conservatives put ideology before saving lives of drug addicts; Study after study supports Insite's value, yet the Tories want to shut it down

The Gazette (Montreal)

Wed 24 Sep 2008

Page: A25

Section: Editorial / Op-Ed

Byline: JANET BAGNALL

Column: Election 2008

Source: The Gazette

Insite, the medically supervised injection site in Vancouver's downtown eastside, is a moral test the Conservatives seem determined to fail.

As a safe, supervised place for intravenous drug addicts to go, the clinic has saved lives, helped slow down the spread of HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C, provided support to mentally ill or homeless drug addicts, and helped stabilize a large population of addicts in Canada's poorest urban neighbourhood.

None of this appears to matter to the Conservatives. They are committed to ideology - drug-taking is bad and anything that makes it easier is bad even though lives are saved, to the point of trotting out bogus research to try to shore up their untenable position.

On Monday, the clinic, the only one of its kind in North America, celebrated five years of success-filled existence. The clinic's defenders had no time to celebrate. They are in a pitched battle with Ottawa to maintain this safe haven for some of Canada's most vulnerable people.

When the clinic was first proposed, a requirement was that rigorous research be carried out into its effects on the target population and on the surrounding neighbourhood.

More than 30 peer-reviewed papers have now been published. The research, which has appeared in some of the world's best peer-reviewed medical journals, including the New England Journal of Medicine, the British Medical Journal, the Lancet and the Canadian Medical Association Journal, show that the site and the services it offers work.

In a single year, more than 1,600 drug addicts were referred into addiction counselling. Addicts using the site proved more likely to enter detox programs, with one in five regulars at the centre starting a detox program.

Out of 500 overdoses at the site over a two-year period, there were no deaths. Had addicts overdosed outside the site, on the street, they would likely have died.

Among the addicts helped at the site is a woman the staff have called Lily, for purposes of publicizing her story. Now in her mid-40s, Lily suffers the effects of fetal alcohol syndrome and is also mentally ill. The injection site has become Lily's lifeline as she weans herself from drugs.

Research into neighbourhood safety found the level of drug-related crime remained unchanged, except for a sharp drop in the rate of car break-ins.

Health Minister Tony Clement has dismissed Lily, the people who have helped her and hundreds of other addicts, the saved lives and the clinic - on ideological grounds.

He called into question the ethics of health-care professionals supporting "the administration of drugs that are of unknown substance or purity potency, drugs that cannot otherwise be legally prescribed."

At the August meeting of the Canadian Medical Association, Clement claimed that there was research "questioning of the research that has already taken place and questioning of the methodology of those associated with Insite."

A spokesperson for Clement told the National Review of Medicine that the research Clement was referring to was an opinion piece by Colin Mangham, president of the Drug Prevention Network of Canada, a private organization whose past president is former Conservative MP Randy White.

Inserting opinion into a discussion of public policy and calling it research is reminiscent of all the "What global warming?" studies that were marched out to try to deny the increasingly undeniable phenomenon of climate change.

Briefly, Vancouver's injection site seemed to have reached a safe shore earlier this year when B.C. Supreme Court Justice Ian Pitfield, in a strongly worded ruling, declared the federal drug laws that made Insite illegal to operate were unconstitutional. The federal government appealed the ruling.

The judge ordered the site to remain open for a year to allow time for the government to rewrite drug laws.

Closing down a safe-injection clinic whose users are in the vast majority homeless, mentally ill, addicted, impoverished fellow citizens is a heartless and pointless exercise.

Does Clement think that allowing drug addicts to contract HIV/AIDS or Hepatitis C is going to discourage their drug-taking? Or just make them ill?

Clement claims to be acting out of concern for the country's youth, wanting to set a good example for them. Letting mentally ill drug-addicts die on the streets of Vancouver is not - let me assure him of this - a good example for anyone at any age.

jbagnall@thegazette.canwest.com