Harm reduction is a thoughtful, just and science-based approach to drugs. It represents policies, strategies and services which aim to assist people who use legal and illegal psychoactive drugs to live safer and healthier lives. Reduction of drug use is a personal choice, and supported, but is not expected or required in a harm reduction approach. It is understood that most people who use substances do not experience problems, but in some circumstances, substance use can become dependent and/or chaotic. Harm reduction enhances the ability of people who use substances to have increased control over their lives and their health, and allows them to take protective and proactive measures for themselves, their families and their communities.

STREETWORKS (EDMONTON)

Harm reduction reflects widespread consensus among a range of government officials, health care professionals, police and law enforcement agencies, academics and non-governmental organizations. Yet in 2007, the Government of Canada removed harm reduction as an official element of Canada’s federal drug strategy and implemented a more punitive approach to drug policy. Once a relative leader in progressive drug policy, Canada has also opposed harm reduction within international forums as a key component of global and national drug strategies.

While provincial governments continue to develop harm reduction services together with the evolution of municipal drug strategies, federal policy priorities are increasingly obstructing the implementation of local harm reduction responses.

For example, despite objections from virtually all health experts, in June 2015 the federal government passed Bill C-2 (the so-called Respect for Communities Act). This new law makes it much more difficult for health authorities, municipalities or other organizations to operate supervised consumption services, such as Vancouver’s highly successful Insite, without the risk of clients facing criminal charges when using these essential health services.

FACTS AND FIGURES

- Harm reduction saves lives and safeguards human rights. Evidence suggests that Vancouver’s supervised injection site, Insite, may have prevented as many as 48 overdose deaths over a four-year period. The Supreme Court of Canada has recognized that preventing access...
to Insite violates the constitutional rights of people who use drugs.

- Canada’s National Anti-Drug Strategy only allocates 2% of its $578.6 million-dollar budget to harm reduction, while law enforcement receives 70%.

- Far too many people are contracting infectious diseases because of a lack of harm reduction services. Current data indicates that 12.8% of new HIV infections in Canada are attributable to injection drug use. Each new infection will cost the health care system at least $250,000 over a lifetime.

- Harm reduction makes financial sense. A cost-benefit analysis of supervised consumption sites concludes that they save taxpayers money. But despite their proven benefits, harm reduction programs face perpetual underfunding.

ENDNOTES

1 Drug Strategy and Controlled Substances Programme & Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, National Framework for Action to Reduce the Harms Associated with Alcohol and Other Drugs and Substances in Canada (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2005); Canadian Foundation for Drug Policy, HIV/AIDS and Injection Drug Use: A National Action Plan (Ottawa: Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse & the Canadian Public Health Association, 1997).

2 Urban Health Research Initiative, Insight into Insite (Vancouver: BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, 2010).


