HARM REDUCTION
BC NURSES’ UNION BELIEVES THAT:

> Harm reduction is an important health service for people living with addictions. It is safe, cost effective and saves lives while reducing suffering.¹

> Harm reduction and the overall four pillars approach fit into the nursing model of healthcare.

> Harm reduction benefits:

> people with addictions, who need supportive healthcare services;

> nurses (and other service providers), who have concrete alternatives to offer those in need of rehabilitation but are not ready for it;

> the public, who saves tax dollars from the criminal justice, social services and healthcare systems by keeping those with drug addictions (and societies) safer.

> Scientific, medical and legal evidence from Vancouver and internationally has conclusively proven the worthiness of harm reduction approaches. Harm reduction services are an indispensable part of win-win solutions to the complex psychosocial problems of illicit drug use.

> Community development and social justice approaches to dealing with the psychosocial root causes of drug addictions are valuable companions to harm reduction approaches and will help, in the long term, to reduce addictions.

> The federal Supreme Court decision of September 30, 2011 – that upheld the right of InSite to remain open – is a victory for the people of Canada, the majority of whom support harm reduction approaches. The national government has been pushing an ideological position that has no scientific, medical or legal merit. Instead of mounting expensive legal campaigns in our highest courts the federal government ought to focus on creating a healthier Canada, for all people.

BACKGROUND

Harm Reduction Approaches to Working with People Addicted to Illicit Drugs

Harm reduction is an umbrella term for interventions that aim to reduce the damaging effect of various behaviours such as drug use. Harm reduction provides pragmatic and compassionate (“come as you are”) approaches to working with people who live with addictions. Harm reduction approaches meet people “where they are at,” neither ignoring nor condoning the detrimental effects of drug addiction to individuals and societies. The four pillars approach, initiated in Europe, addresses illicit drug addiction through prevention, treatment, harm reduction and enforcement.²


Harm reduction is a viable method of working with people living with addictions (who are not ready to choose abstinence), according to a multitude of rigorously conducted studies over many years. It is a bridge between those who are actively using and accessing detox/other treatment services. Many intravenous drug users who have accessed harm reduction services, such as InSite, move on to further treatment. Contrary to assumptions of those who do not support such services, harm reduction does not encourage more addiction or produce more intravenous drug users. Studies conducted in many countries have shown that harm reduction significantly reduces morbidity and mortality for a variety of conditions including HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C.

Addressing the psychosocial root causes of addictions, in tandem with harm reduction approaches, shows promise for preventing drug addiction. BC needs more programs based on social justice and community development principles. Long term solutions that will make a big impact include comprehensive programs to help children who are abused and families struggling with violence, alienation, racism and other complex social problems. Psychosocial problems require psychosocial solutions.

INSITE – CANADA’S SHOWCASE HARM REDUCTION SERVICE, BASED IN VANCOUVER

InSite is a supervised injection site which provides clean equipment and space for intravenous drug use, first aid, treatment for overdoses, wounds, counselling and more. Nurses have been authorized by the CRNBC to provide its clinical services. Started in 2003, it is the first and only service of its kind in the country. It is located in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (DTES), one of Canada’s most dispossessed neighbourhoods, where extreme poverty, homelessness, high rates of mental illness, violence and other social problems exist. The majority of residents in DTES are Indigenous people, who continue to confront ongoing legacies of residential school syndrome, racism and other repressive realities.
Community development and social justice approaches to dealing with the psychosocial root causes of drug addictions are valuable companions to harm reduction approaches and will help, in the long term, to reduce addictions.

InSite’s existence has reduced overdose deaths by 35%, saving hundreds of lives. Peer-reviewed studies have compellingly demonstrated the health, legal and social benefits of InSite: it saves lives and helps those who are ready to contemplate moving towards drug rehabilitation; it is cost effective; it decreases public disorderliness and crime. Hundreds of nurses, scientists, physicians, political leaders and others around the world have thus called for the expansion of such facilities.

Internationally, these types of facilities and other harm reduction services, are growing in popularity as governments see their tremendous value. Supported by the UN, at least 82 countries have harm reduction services, with nations in Australasia leading the way.

Despite the overwhelming legal, clinical and social evidence that harm reduction approaches are effective, the Canadian government is bucking this international trend, standing out as a minority amongst world governments. It has launched an offensive against harm reduction services. The federal government lost two provincial level and a final Supreme Court of Canada battle in an attempt to shut down InSite. BCNU was an intervenor in this court case, acting (as one of many parties) on behalf of the people of BC and Canada, who support the existence of InSite.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Please contact your BCNU Regional Chair to discuss these issues. Go to www.bcnu.org or look in your Update magazine for a list or representatives.