

GABOR MATÉ M.D.
941 WEST 22ND AVENUE
VANCOUVER, B.C. V5Z 2A2

Phone: (604) 736-4716 Fax: (604) 736-4733 e-mail: gmate@telus.net Cell: (604) 790-4716

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The Right Honourable Stephen Harper, PC, MP
Prime Minister of Canada
Office of the Prime Minister
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, K1A 0A2

Dear Prime Minister Harper:

RE: Safe Injection Site

As a family physician providing medical care to the addicted population in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, I write to respectfully urge your government to continue federal support for the Safe Injection Site.

The patients I work with, many of whom use the SIS, have the medical disease of substance dependence. They suffer from many of the conditions associated with this disease: HIV, Hepatitis C, recurrent heart valve infections, superficial and deep tissue abscesses, respiratory infections and, often, mental illness that either predated or was triggered by their drug use. Furthermore, their life histories are invariably those of serial neglect as young children, sexual violation, physical torture and emotional abuse. According to all the research evidence, such experiences underlie and potentiate the disease of intravenous drug addiction.

The SIS is a facility that attempts, in a modest but essential way, to reduce the harm attendant on the disease of dependence. By providing unused needles in a clean environment, it helps prevent or, at least, to reduce the incidence of the infectious complications of intravenous drug use. It also helps reduce the appalling toll of overdose deaths by allowing drug self-administration in a supervised context. Importantly, it puts drug users into regular contact with health personnel who are able to address their other medical problems and, crucially, with counselors who can support them in dealing with and possibly resolving their drug addiction.

This is a difficult population to work with. Because of their uniformly tragic early childhood histories they do not well know how to take care of themselves and they do not readily seek help from health providers. The SIS is a link—for some their only link-- between their street lives and the health care system and, for many, it is one of the first institutions they have encountered where they feel treated in a supportive, humane way. For the physically and emotionally wounded people they are, that is no small matter.

The medical benefits of the SIS have been demonstrated by research. The social benefits to the Downtown Eastside are well known to the merchants of the area who are grateful that their businesses, long jeopardized by the open intravenous drug use around their establishments, are now less blighted--and, of course, to the overtaxed police force.

What is difficult to convey, Mr. Prime Minister, are the human benefits. Our society provides compassionate help to many groups and individuals who, for whatever reason, make lifestyle choices inimical to their health. We may warn people against smoking, for example, but we don't

deny smokers the most advanced and best-researched medical help for the innumerable health consequences of their nicotine addiction. Intravenous substance addiction also has many consequences that impose tremendous suffering on addicted human beings. The SIS is far from a full answer to the complex problem of drug addiction, but it is an innovative and necessary small step. It helps prevent and ameliorate some of those terrible consequences. It helps diminish to a small but appreciable degree, human suffering. It is in line with our most deeply cherished Judeo-Christian spiritual principles of non-judgmental, compassionate support for our fellow human beings. The SIS is a project Canadian society can be proud of, one which, in time, will be emulated in many jurisdictions around the world.

I request and urge that your government continues federal support for the SIS and that consideration be given to other such facilities elsewhere in our country, wherever circumstances warrant. As a physician I would be failing my duty to my patients if I did not make this appeal and I do so in the certainty that as Prime Minister you hold the best interests of all Canadians in equal regard, including the marginalized and physically, medically and emotionally destitute population served by the SIS.

Respectfully yours,

Gabor Maté M.D.

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