

# Stop treating drug users as criminals

GABOR MATÉ

SPECIAL TO GLOBE AND MAIL UPDATE

The U.S.-style law-and-order drug policies that the Conservative cabinet appears poised to embrace are doomed to fail in this country, as they have everywhere. What's worse, they make impossible the rational and humane treatment of hard-core drug addiction.

It is not feasible to rehabilitate large numbers of substance-dependent people in the context of the so-called war on drugs. "The federal government continues to invest heavily in policies and practices that have been repeatedly shown in the scientific literature to be ineffective or harmful," says a new study by physicians and researchers at the B.C. Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS.

As a doctor serving a heavily addicted population in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, I witness that harm every day. My last patient the same morning this new study was reported was Priscilla, a 32-year-old woman who came panting into my office with a high fever and a strangulating cough. Her pneumonia began several days ago when she woke after one of Vancouver's heavy windstorms to find that the windows of her dilapidated hotel room had been shattered during the night and that the water in her sink was frozen solid.

Priscilla is one of the enemy in the war on drugs. She sells cocaine to support her own habit, a dependence from which no calamity has been able to shake her loose: not the loss of her child, not HIV, not multiple illnesses, not brutal beatings at the hands of male "clients." She became one of the enemy at 15 when, after many years of sexual abuse by her grandfather and uncle, her mother injected her with heroin and sold her into prostitution.

