

Australia backs safe injection program

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VANCOUVER -- The escalating campaign to keep the doors open at Vancouver's landmark safe-injection site for heroin addicts has reached across the Pacific to Australia.

A group representing more than 100 Australian federal and state politicians wrote last week to Prime Minister Stephen Harper expressing its strong support for the city's injection site, known as Insite.

The Vancouver facility's three-year legal protection to allow on-site heroin use expires on Sept. 12, and the Conservative government, with Mr. Harper previously on record opposing the safe-injection site, has not committed itself to renewing it.

Nor has the government agreed to any further funds for the ambitious research project on the site's impact on injection drug users.

"Our message to your Prime Minister is not to close his eyes to the success of safe-injection sites," Australian federal MP Duncan Kerr, a former attorney-general, said in an interview yesterday.

"The option of criminalization and drug enforcement is a recipe for disaster that drugs will bring to your community."

The letter from the Australian Parliamentary Group for Drug Law Reform was released by a remarkably broad-based community group, Insite for Community Safety (IFCS), which is pressing the Harper government to keep the site running.

"We are trying not to corner them," said IFCS spokesperson Gillian Maxwell, "but I am concerned that this is now mid-July and we haven't heard anything from the government.

"I think it's 50-50 that they will renew the exemption, and that makes me nervous."

Many of those now in favour of Insite once strongly opposed it, particularly merchants in nearby Chinatown and Gastown.

"If the site were to be closed, the drug users will be forced back onto the streets to administer their habits," Albert Fok, chairman of the Chinatown Merchants Association, told Mr. Harper in a letter.

No one backs Insite more than Mayor Sam Sullivan, himself a federal Tory supporter, who has gone so far as to call for free heroin for drug addicts.

"Vancouver has the most innovative drug policy on the continent," said Mr. Sullivan. "Already, we can see less disorder in the streets and alleys from people shooting up. It would be a tragedy to move backwards."

Health Canada spokesman Chris Williams confirmed the government is still considering the matter.

"We have undertaken an assessment of the research results to date. As of right now, we are not committed to any new exemption or any further funding," Mr. Williams said.

During a campaign visit to the Lower Mainland late last year, Mr. Harper declared that a Conservative government "will not use taxpayers' money to fund drug use. This is not the strategy we will pursue."

Mr. Kerr of the all-party Australian parliamentary group said his country's five-year-old safe-injection site in Sydney has saved lives, while providing a pathway to recovery for long-time addicts.

"It's been reviewed by independent assessors and their conclusion is that it is cost-effective and has saved a number of lives."

Vancouver's injection site has had similar, albeit preliminary, results.

So far, there have been 453 incidents of drug overdose at the site without a single death. As well, on-site nurses have treated more than 2,000 serious abscesses at the facility, easing the strain on hospital emergency departments, and 368 heroin addicts have been referred to withdrawal programs.

"A lot of evidence is already in and it's clear," said researcher Martin Schechter. "The safe-injection site does not increase drug use and it does reduce harm."

Dr. Schechter is spearheading a trial, separate from the safe-injection site experiment, that studies the effect of providing free heroin to addicts.

Stressing that the trial is not yet close to completion, he said many users enrolled in the trial now need only about 40 per cent of the heroin they previously injected.

"And anecdotally, some have already told us they have given up prostitution and reduced their criminal activity," Dr. Schechter added.