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Safe drug sites lauded

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VANCOUVER -- North America's only government-sanctioned safe-injection site for drug addicts, in the heart of Vancouver's notorious Downtown Eastside, is a life saver, a new study concludes.

Not one death resulted from a total of 336 drug overdoses at the site over an 18-month period ending last August, according to the study by Vancouver medical researchers published in this week's International Journal of Drug Policy.

Previous studies of drug addict populations have found that about 4 per cent of overdoses result in death.

And on the city's mean streets outside the injection site, 64 people died from using illicit drugs in 2004, the most recent year for which figures are available.

"The clear indication is that the city's safe-injection site saves lives," Dr. Thomas Kerr, the study's senior author, said yesterday.

As well, with at least one nurse always present, barely 25 per cent of drug overdoses at the safe-injection site resulted in a trip to the hospital, easing the stress on local emergency departments.

The latest finding adds to a growing wealth of evidence identifying numerous specific benefits since the controversial facility, known as Insite, began operating in September, 2003.

Findings from earlier studies, all peer-reviewed and published in reputable journals, include:

a marked increase in users seeking detox programs;

reduced criminal activity by those who use the site for their injections;

fewer addicts shooting up in public and discarding their drug paraphernalia in the Downtown Eastside neighbourhood;

a large decrease in sharing needles among addicts who use the site, one of the biggest risks for contracting HIV and hepatitis C;

the presence of Insite has not led to increased rates of relapse among former drug users, nor has it been a negative influence on those trying to kick their habit.

"This sheer volume of positive findings is highly unusual," said Dr. Kerr, an assistant medical professor at the University of B.C. and research scientist with the B.C. Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS at St. Paul's Hospital.

Even so, the federal Conservative government could shut the pilot project down in September.

The three-year exemption from anti-drug laws that allows addicts to shoot up on the site runs out Sept. 15.

During the last election campaign, Conservative Leader Stephen Harper said he opposed government support for programs using illegal drugs.

The Tories have said little about the safe-injection site, other than that they are reviewing the research.

Calls to federal Health Minister Tony Clement and B.C.'s senior federal cabinet minister, Chuck Strahl, were not returned yesterday.

"Given all the positive benefits, I don't know how much discussion is needed," Dr. Kerr said. "The data show that Insite does not enable drug use, it increases the detox rate, there is no increase in crime, public disorder has been reduced, and there is less needle sharing. Plus, there has not been one fatal overdose."

Victoria Mayor Alan Lowe yesterday commissioned a six-month study into establishing safe-injection sites in Victoria, pointing to the positive results in Vancouver.