

## Safe-injection site fate awaits: The only operation of its kind, giving intravenous drug users a supervised place to inject, will close in September without federal approval for its continuation

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VANCOUVER - As the deadline for extending Vancouver's first and only supervised **safe-injection site** grows closer, people who are involved with the site are intensifying their efforts to demonstrate its benefits to Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservative government.

Consequently, more studies are emerging to illustrate those benefits, the latest of which says that in addition to saving lives, the site reduces ambulance visits and hospital stays.

The site, near Main and Hastings in the Downtown Eastside, will close in September unless the federal government grants a continued 31/2-year exemption from Canada's narcotics law that permits drug users to inject drugs safely.

Harper told Vancouver reporters in June that he was waiting for assessments from the RCMP and other agencies before his government would make any decision on whether to extend that exemption, which expires Sept. 12.

But according to a report by Simon Fraser University criminologist Raymond Corrado, obtained by The Vancouver Sun, Vancouver RCMP have reported "consistently positive" results for the site.

Corrado says the site provides **safe-injection** education to those who need it the most. There were no deaths from drug overdoses on site and few in the nearby areas. Binge drug use was down. The area around the injection site had less drug-related litter. And, despite the fears of many people, drug use did not increase.

The shortcomings, Corrado noted, were that there were "disappointingly few referrals ... to detoxification services, largely because clients usually did not meet the strict conditions required to access these services."

As well, he questioned why so few young drug users access the site, although he makes no reference to the fact that Health Canada stipulated that people under 18 were not allowed to use the site and that users were permitted to inject only once per visit thus continuing the problem of addicts injecting in public.

### IMAGES



Peter Battistoni, Vancouver Sun  
Maura Ahmad (left) and Thia Walter support the safe-injection site in the Downtown Eastside.



Peter Battistoni, Vancouver Sun  
Supporters of Vancouver's safe-injection site rally outside the Carnegie Centre to express their hope that the federal government will continue its exemption from Canadian narcotics law.



Peter Battistoni, Vancouver Sun  
Brightly-lit booths line a wall at the Insite safe-injection site on Hastings Street, where drug users can be supervised.

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Corrado's report is complemented by a second report, also by a B.C. criminologist, Irwin Cohen, that summarizes the research on European supervised injection sites, which generally finds that they have produced positive outcomes.

However, RCMP spokesman Staff Sgt. John Ward said these assessments are "only part of our process of looking into" the question of supervised injection sites and that the RCMP's position continues to be that it does not support any initiative that encourages drug use or any legalization of drugs currently prohibited in Canada.

According to information accompanying the reports, Corrado's review was commissioned by Chief Supt. Derek Ogden, the RCMP director for drugs and organized crime.

Ward said he could not confirm with absolute certainty that these particular reports were commissioned by the RCMP, although he guessed that they had been, as the RCMP is in the midst of gathering information on supervised injection sites.

Nor could he say if the reports had been sent to the prime minister's office or Health Canada.

"We haven't officially commented on those reviews," he said.

The RCMP did not support the exemption last time. But the city -- with former mayor Larry Campbell leading the way -- Vancouver police, the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority and the provincial medical health officer did support it, which met Health Canada's requirement for political, police and community approval.

Dr. David Marsh, the physician leader for addiction medicine for Vancouver Coastal Health, said Wednesday that all parties involved were still in the process of applying for another exemption.

"We've had correspondence back and forth to clarify answers to questions they had, and now we're waiting for a final decision."

Marsh couldn't say when the decision will come, but added that he hopes "it will be sooner rather than later."

"As a clinician who's worked in the field for many years, I'm convinced there are people who would have died if their overdoses had happened anywhere else."

On Wednesday, Carole Saindon, a spokeswoman for Health Canada, couldn't say when an answer would be provided, only that the government was continuing to study research around the site.

"The Government of Canada will not consider any other similar projects until the assessment of the research findings from the existing project had been completed," Saindon said.

Marsh's colleague, Dr. Thomas Kerr, the principal investigator of scientific evaluations of the site, said results from the site show the exchange of dirty needles and syringes is down in the district, and that people who use the site tend to seek rehabilitation more than people who don't.

"I can't see any reason why it wouldn't go forward unless we had a decision based on ideology and not science," Kerr said.

As well, a coalition of Downtown Eastside groups, spearheaded by the **Portland Hotel Society** -- a longtime advocate for improved health services for drug users -- has been collecting signatures and sending out material to Ottawa that shows community support and positive scientific evaluations.

"We felt it was necessary to make sure people in Ottawa get all the information. We don't want them to do something stupid because they aren't informed," said PHS Director **Mark Townsend**, whose group provides staff workers for the Coastal Health Authority-operated site.

Today, the coalition will erect 336 crosses in Vanier Park to demonstrate the number of lives at risk should Harper not renew the facility's operating exemption.

Vancouver Mayor Sam Sullivan is not part of that coalition, but he is also exerting whatever pressure he can to ensure the site gets a renewed exemption.

One of the critical conclusions in Corrado's report is that it's difficult to see a widespread community impact for the site, since it only serves about one-third of the area's drug-using population.

Sullivan said this bolsters his view that "if anything, we should probably have another site."

He was also critical of the other limitations that the previous Health Canada exemption put on the site, besides restricting it to one location, such as the stipulation that people under 18 aren't allowed.

"I found that with both the **safe-injection site** and NAOMI, the heroin-maintenance trial, Health Canada has consistently obstructed the best practices," said Sullivan.

"It's been very frustrating from my end. They have put up so many roadblocks and the costs have been greatly increased."

The site currently has more than 7,000 registered users and it operates at capacity for most of its 18-hours-a-day operation.

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Illustration:

- Colour Photo: Peter Battistoni, Vancouver Sun / Maura Ahmad (left) and Thia Walter support the **safe-injection site** in the Downtown Eastside.
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