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Study indicates deaths and health costs cut

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Byline: Nicholas Read

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Vancouver's **safe-injection site** is reducing hospital visits and ambulance costs as well as saving lives, says a new study to be published today in the International Journal of Drug Policy.

The study, written by the B.C. Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, says that between March 2004 and August 2005, there were 336 overdose events at **Insite**, but none resulted in death.

Moreover, an ambulance had to be called in only 39 per cent of these events, and the people involved had to be taken to hospital in only 28 per cent of them.

Had the overdoses occurred on the street, all of them would have required an ambulance call, said Dr. Thomas Kerr, the principal investigator of the scientific evaluation of **Insite** and an assistant professor in the faculty of medicine at the University of B.C.

However, because in most cases the person taking the overdose was attended to on site, it resulted in a significant cost saving to the provincial health-care system.

"We have busy emergency rooms to be concerned about, and there are substantial savings here," Kerr said.

The cost of calling an ambulance is \$460 if the person being attended to is taken to hospital, and in 1998, the City of Vancouver reported that 1,053 ambulances were sent to the Downtown Eastside on drug and alcohol overdose calls, resulting in a bill of \$484,380.

The study also showed that while the overdose rate at **Insite** is similar to that of other **safe-injection** sites in Europe and Australia -- 1.33 overdoses per 1,000 injections -- no deaths resulted.

Typically, said Kerr, four out of every 100 overdoses result in death. The **Insite** results show, he says, that the facility is doing the job it was intended to do.

"While the pilot facility is small in comparison to the drug-use volume in the Downtown Eastside, the data indicate a supervised injection facility can play a role in managing overdoses among [intravenous drug users] and save lives."

Of the 318 overdoses at **Insite** in which the type of drug was known, heroin was involved in 71 per cent, followed by cocaine (13 per cent), speedballs, which are a mixture of heroin and cocaine (10 per cent), morphine (two per cent) and other drugs (three per cent).

Of the overdose episodes where an ambulance wasn't necessary, most were dealt with by the administration of oxygen. Kerr explained that in most overdose cases, the victim loses respiratory activity and suffocates.

In other cases, victims were given naloxone hydrochloride, an opiate antagonist that counters the effects of opiates.

The study also showed that in Vancouver, most of the drug users who overdosed were inexperienced drug takers. This contradicts the experience of other **safe-injection** sites where most overdoses were by long-time drug users.

Kerr couldn't say why this was, but said it reinforces the importance **Insite** plays in the community.

"These are individuals who really need this type of support as a means of ensuring their health and, in this case, their survival."

nread@png.canwest.com

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