



## St Vincent's Hospital

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Dear Prime Minister,

I write to express my very strong support for the Supervised Injection Facility in Vancouver, British Columbia. I understand that the continuation of this important project depends upon a decision by the Minister of Health, the Right Honorable Tony Clement, to provide a required renewal.

It may help you to assess this letter if you know something of my background. I am a specialist physician from Australia and have worked in the alcohol and drug area since 1980. I am the Director of an Alcohol and Drug Service employing over 60 staff in St. Vincent's Hospital, Sydney. I have worked since 1982 at this publicly funded university teaching hospital located in an area in Sydney very similar to the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver.

In November 1986, after 2 years of unsuccessful efforts to establish a legal pilot, my colleagues and I commenced an unsanctioned needle syringe programme. Regrettably, we were forced to resort to this act of civil disobedience. Our actions forced the issue and within 2 years, Australia was covered with needle syringe programmes in all jurisdictions. This contributed to the excellent control of HIV infection among injecting drug users in Australia, a situation which has persisted till today. The needle syringe programme in Australia is credited officially with preventing 25,000 HIV infections, saving 4,500 deaths from AIDS and saving up to \$A 7 billion.

In May 1999, my colleagues and I established Australia's first Medically Supervised Injecting Centre. Again, we were regrettably forced to resort to civil disobedience. However, the authorities had the good sense to accept the logic of our strong arguments for a Medically Supervised Injecting Centre. Consequently, the NSW Government invited my hospital to establish a legal Medically Supervised Injecting Centre on 27 July 1999. Unfortunately, some months later we were unable to proceed following a direction from the Vatican to the Sisters of Charity. However, another ecclesiastical organization was invited to take on this project and oversaw the establishment and successful operation of this centre.

In 1987, my colleagues and I helped to establish the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre. I have been a short-term consultant to the World Health Organisation and UNAIDS on numerous occasions in numerous countries. I am the author or co-author of more than 230 scientific papers, including several

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papers on Medically Supervised Injecting Centres. I follow the scientific literature on this subject very closely. I have visited the beautiful city of Vancouver on half a dozen occasions, stayed in the Downtown Eastside area twice and visited the Supervised Injection Facility in Vancouver. I have had the pleasure of meeting the *current* Mayor of Vancouver and his two distinguished predecessors. In summary, I believe that I am in an excellent position to be able to comment on the Supervised Injection Facility in Vancouver.

Vancouver has been beset with a terrible problem of illicit drugs and injecting for at least the last 15 years. I am aware of the serious epidemic of drug overdose deaths, the epidemic of HIV among and from injecting drug users and the high rates of drug related crime. These are among the worst outcomes of any city in a developed country for the last 25 years. It is no reflection on the unstinting efforts of national and drug law enforcement to say that the criminal justice system was simply unable to bring this situation under control. After considerable thought and debate, Vancouver authorities, supported by the provincial authorities, established the Supervised Injection Facility in Vancouver among a range of other innovative measures aimed to improve life for residents of Vancouver and to protect public health and reduce crime in British Columbia and Canada.

The Supervised Injection Facility in Vancouver has been established with great care and thoughtfulness. Even more important, it has been subjected to intense scientific scrutiny and evaluation, resulting in the publication of 20 scientific papers in prestigious journals. I have read almost all of these papers. They demonstrate that there have been substantial benefits from the Supervised Injection Facility and no serious unintended negative consequences. They have taken the science of evaluation of these facilities to a much higher standard. It is inconceivable to me that authorities aiming to improve the neighbourhood amenity for residents in the Downtown Eastside, or to protect public health in British Columbia and Canada could terminate this innovative project. Aborting this project after the demonstration of such benefit and without any serious unintended negative consequences can only mean that to the policy makers, appearances matter more than outcomes and that relenting to incessant pressure from the United States of America is acceptable even when Canada has an excellent case to follow a different path.

Yours sincerely,



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