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## Emerson wants safe-injection site to remain open

### Vancouver MP says he will pressure Health Minister to extend project

PETER KENNEDY AND ROD MICKLEBURGH

VANCOUVER -- David Emerson, the lone Vancouver voice in the federal cabinet, said yesterday he will press Health Minister Tony Clement to extend operation of the city's landmark safe-injection site for heroin addicts.

In an interview, Mr. Emerson said he has been impressed by the extent of scientific, peer-reviewed research attesting to the site's success in combatting health and social concerns.

"To be honest with you, I am an advocate of some of those things which have been proven to be successful and can pass rigorous tests in terms of whether it is good use of taxpayers' money," he said.

Although Mr. Emerson did not identify any specific studies, one released this week found that not a single death resulted from 336 drug overdoses at the site during an 18-month period.



The study also found that the onsite presence of nurses able to treat drug users who overdose has drastically reduced ambulance trips and hospitalization for addicts.

An earlier study reported there was a significant increase in heroin addicts who use the facility seeking detox treatment, compared with addicts who go elsewhere to shoot up.

Yet supporters of the government-sanctioned, 12-booth site, the only such facility in North America, are concerned that the federal Conservatives may not renew the legal exemption necessary to permit users to inject illegal drugs.

The current, three-year exemption, granted by the previous Liberal government, expires Sept. 15. Without it, the project, which accommodates more than 600 drug addicts every day, would have to close.

During the last election campaign, while still Opposition Leader, Stephen Harper said that he was opposed to providing government support for the use of illegal drugs.

An adjunct of the city's safe injection site, known as Insite, is a continuing trial that assesses the impact of giving free heroin to a number of addicts.

Subsequently, Mr. Harper said he was waiting for an RCMP report on Insite's operation, even though Vancouver police support the site.

"So far, what I read in the newspaper looks very positive," said Mr. Emerson, who was also part of the Liberal government that sanctioned Insite in the first place.

The Vancouver-Kingsway MP and Minister of International Trade jumped into the Conservative cabinet shortly after his re-election as a Liberal in January.

"I want to have a closer look at it, and I intend to be an advocate within the federal government, once I have completed my due diligence on the research."

Mr. Emerson said he is looking forward to discussing the issue with Mr. Clement, who is ultimately responsible for the site. He declined to speculate what the final decision will be.

"I don't want to bet on something that is in the hands of another minister," Mr. Emerson said, adding, "If the weight of arguments are in favour, I'm sure the government will be in favour."

A broad-based community campaign is bombarding Mr. Harper's office with letters and petitions urging him to keep the site's doors open.

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