



Safe-injection site a help, if only marginally: Minister leaning toward keeping drug station open

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For all the sound and fury over Vancouver's safe-injection site, or "shooting gallery" to its critics, it barely knocks a dent in the sprawling public drug use on the mean streets of the Downtown Eastside.

About 600 injections of heroin and other illicit drugs occur daily at Insite, the \$2-million-a-year facility financed by B.C. taxpayers.

Compare that to the estimated 15,000 injections that take place each day in Canada's poorest postal code.

Advocates for the neighbourhood's addicts say the lopsided numbers argue in favour of building more safe-injection sites, not charging public drug users with committing a crime.

Health Minister George Abbott disagrees. At least for now.

"The police do a good job," Abbott told me yesterday, saying he fully agrees with the cops' new zero-tolerance policy for public drug use.

But outreach and counselling to addicts is also critical, which is why Abbott says Insite will likely stay open beyond its three-year trial period.

"Some of the results have been encouraging," he said of the facility that's been open for two years now.

He lists these highlights:

- Over 100 on-site overdose interventions with no fatalities.
- A 10-per-cent reduction in new reported HIV cases.
- No increase in relapse rates or decrease in stopping rates among Insite users, countering arguments that the site will trigger relapses by former addicts or discourage people from kicking their habit.

"It's important that we don't form conclusions before the trial period is over," Abbott said.

"But I'm probably leaning in favour of continuation of the site."

Despite the positive numbers coming out of Insite, problems remain. One is the reluctance of users to get counselling.

While the site supervises 600 injections a day, only two to four users are referred to addiction counselling services a day, even though the counselling is available right at the site. And it's obvious to anyone who simply drives along those desperate city blocks that public drug use is still rampant.

Abbott says there are no plans, for now, to expand Insite or build new facilities. He supports the police crackdown.

The bottom line: The safe-injection site is a ripple against a tide of misery. But it's making a difference and should remain open in 2007 and beyond.

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