

Victoria taking first step toward creating a safe injection site for drug addicts

VICTORIA | Vancouver Island's chief medical health officer is taking the first step toward creating a safe injection site in Victoria by developing a business plan for such a facility.

Dr. Richard Stanwick's proposal outlines potential costs, building types, partnership agreements, and public health benefits. He recently started on the project, but his plan could be finished by March, he said.

"This is the document that really cements the rationale for moving forward," Stanwick said.

"Conceptually we've been given the go-ahead to explore it...this is the first step."

After months of discussion on the issue by politicians and health officials, Stanwick's business plan marks the first attempt to present a researched set of options.

"This will hopefully raise the level of understanding and, quite candidly, improve the debate instead of it being purely on a conceptual level," said Stanwick.

A safe injection site gives addicts a place to inject drugs in a clean environment, with sterile equipment, under the supervision of medical staff. It would be a vast improvement from current conditions where local addicts use puddle water and dirty needles, and where infections become resistant to treatment, said Stanwick.

The Vancouver Island Health Authority would likely control the budget for such a site, and staff the facility with health care workers.

Vancouver is currently the only city in North America to have a safe injection site, which is in the second year of a three-year federal government trial.

In Victoria, Mayor Alan Lowe was re-elected on promises to create a local safe injection site sometime in "the new year."

Stanwick said his business case works closely with Lowe's idea of "contact sites" to include medical facilities and community services.

As well, the business case attempts to answer questions raised from groups such as the Greater Victoria Chamber of Commerce. Bruce Carter, chamber CEO, said his organization has asked about economic impact, quality of life for citizens and future taxation levels.

Stanwick said the plan will be done "as soon as possible" and likely presented for approval to the VIHA board in March.

From there, the board can decide if a safe injection site is feasible and if the health authority should move to partner with private companies, as is done in Germany, or go it alone, as Vancouver has done, said Stanwick.

Election promise



VANCOUVER SUN FILES

Victoria Mayor Alan Lowe promised during his re-election campaign to create a safe injection site in 2006.