

# Injection site attracting young users

Study says the drug-use haven enhances public safety by taking high-risk addicts off the street

BY DORIS SUN  
VANCOUVER SUN

**VANCOUVER** | Vancouver's Downtown Eastside drug injection site is attracting high-risk drug users who may otherwise pose safety risks by using drugs in public, says a study conducted by the B.C. Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS.

Results of the study, which are being released today by the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, say the site is attracting young drug users who have an elevated risk of HIV infection and overdose, not older, low-risk drug users as previously thought.

The study was based on a survey of over 400 active injection drug users since the site opened in September 2003.

The pilot site, the first of its kind in North America, is funded by Health Canada and the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority. It offers sterile drug injection equipment to users in a medically supervised setting.

Dr. Evan Wood, epidemiologist at the centre for excellence and professor of medicine at UBC, said the creation of a sanctioned area for drug users prevents them from using drugs in unsafe public spaces.

"Essentially, there is no space for drug use because it's an illicit activity," Wood said in an interview Monday. "Illicit drug use takes place in unsterile envi-



IAN SMITH/VANCOUVER SUN

The Downtown Eastside's safe injection site provides 12 booths complete with a dish holding a clean needle, antiseptic, sterile water, a spoon and a tourniquet.

ronments — behind dumpsters, in shooting galleries — in these types of hidden environments. That's an effect of our current approach to the drug problem."

Wood said the availability of safe injection sites with medical supervisory staff decreases the sharing of syringes, prevents overdose incidents, and lowers AIDS contraction.

Chris Buchner, manager of HIV/AIDS and Harm Reduction Programs for Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, said the site addresses drug addiction in a humane way, by connecting services to people who suffer from addiction.

"We should be dealing with people who suffer from addiction in a health setting. If they have a chronic addiction, which we believe is a medical condition, [they shouldn't be] relegated to shooting up behind a

## Site activity

### Use of the Facility March-August 2004

- Number of injections:  
March, 9,620. April, 13,377.  
May, 14,299. June, 14,004.  
July, 14,374. August, 14,288.
- Number of users:  
March, 1,027. April, 1,205.  
May, 1,215. June, 1,220.  
July, 1,236. August, 1,312.
- Number of injections per person:  
March, 9.4. April, 11.1.  
May, 11.8. June, 11.5. July, 11.6. August, 10.9

Source: B.C. Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS

dumpster and being chased around by the police."

Besides providing clean needles, Buchner added the site

also has counselling services for those requesting help.

"If they're willing and open, we provide many more opportunities to them," said Buchner. "We see it really as an access point. So there's the basic protection from overdose and disease transmission that we're trying to provide for them. But beyond that, it's a real access point into a system for care."

Although researchers are optimistic the program promotes safer use of drugs, they see the strategy as one of containment, not eradication of the drug problem.

"Addressing the drug problem is not something, I don't think, that can be solved, said Evans. "It's something that needs to be managed. There's no magic bullets in so many issues of public health policy."

dsun@png.canwest.com



RICHARD LAM/VANCOUVER SUN FILES

Providing clean paraphernalia at the Downtown Eastside injection site is attracting high-risk drug users who may otherwise pose safety risks in public.