



Harper under gun to kill Insite

By Allen Garr

It is inconceivable that Stephen Harper will not approve the continuation of Vancouver's supervised injection site.

The medical evidence is overwhelming that this three-year experiment, where drug addicts are provided a clean, safe place to inject illegal drugs, is a success.

There have been more than 20 peer review articles in the most prestigious medical journals that support the notion the site is working. According to the primary funding agency, Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, it is the most examined experiment of its sort in the world.

Last week, researchers at the Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS seemed to surprise even themselves when they reported in the New England Journal of Medicine that the number of people who used the site and then went on to enter detoxification programs and seek treatment far exceeded those in the general population.

"The more regular use of the facility, known as Insite, and any contact with the facility's addictions counsellor, were both strongly tied to quicker initiation into detoxification," they wrote.

There are more than 600 visits a day to the site. There would be even more if money was provided to keep it open beyond 18 hours a day. Even so, among regular users needle-sharing and the resulting spread of diseases has been reduced. People are regularly rescued from overdosing by staff at the site.

In spite of all the glowing reviews, bureaucrats are still twitchy that Harper will just say no. The current agreement runs out in September. What is involved from Ottawa is both money and permission. Insite needs an exemption under the federal law that prohibits the possession and consumption of illegal drugs. Ottawa also provides funds to assess the program. Last time around that came to about \$1.5 million.

The application for renewal was filed with the federal Ministry of Health more than a month ago. It was accompanied by letters of support from the mayor's office and the Vancouver Police Department. The cops would say the level of public disorder in the area has declined because of the project and the level of criminal activity has not increased.

According to people at this end, questions from Ottawa about the application were minor. The only remaining hurdle is political, which is to say Harper.

Harper has never been a fan of harm reduction or Insite. During a campaign stop on the West Coast during the federal election, he said no tax dollars would go to any program that involved illegal drugs. It is a position that certainly appeals to the right wing of the Tory party even though organizations like the Fraser Institute have argued in favour of the economic benefits of harm reduction.

People on the ground here suspect Harper is getting pressure to abandon the Insite project from the senior ranks of the RCMP. But this is not simply a decision Harper will make based on domestic considerations.

The prime minister's new best friends in the White House consider Insite the equivalent of assisted suicide.

Plans to include an American city in the NAOMI project along with Vancouver and Montreal, to test the results of a heroin maintenance program, were killed before they were even started. The White House drug czar has been pressuring Canadian governments for some time to continue with the failed policy of the War on Drugs.

Harper may consider there is more to be gained internationally than there is to be lost at home by shutting Insite down. Softwood lumber could rear its head again. Then there is the threat to tighten movements across our common border and cut the flow of tourist dollars.

He is expected in Vancouver in the next few days to welcome delegates to the World Urban Forum. It is not inconceivable he will be asked about Insite at that time.

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