



Sharing of needles drops: Risky practice reduced, says study

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A new study says Vancouver's **safe-injection** site has largely reduced needle sharing among many high-risk drug users.

The paper, by researchers at the B.C. Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, is to be published today in *The Lancet*, a leading British medical journal.

The study found that intravenous drug users who use the injection site in the Downtown Eastside are 70-per-cent less likely to share needles.

"After the facility opened, we're seeing reductions in this dangerous behaviour," said lead author Thomas Kerr yesterday.

He added: "This is extremely important because Vancouver has been the site of one of the most explosive HIV epidemics among injection-drug users that has ever been observed in the developed world."

The prevalence of blood-borne diseases among Vancouver injection-drug users is high: About 30 per cent have HIV/AIDS and 95 per cent are infected with hepatitis C.

Needle sharing among intravenous drug users is one of the leading causes of HIV and hepatitis C.

The study reveals that drug users who need help with injecting or who go on drug binges were more likely to share syringes.

Researchers looked at the habits of 431 injection-drug users to see how many shared syringes to shoot up heroin, cocaine, crystal meth or other drugs.

About 90 -- or 21 per cent -- reported visiting the injection site for "some, most or all of their injections," said Kerr.

The injection site, which opened in September 2003, is the only one in North America.

Dubbed **InSite**, its aim is to provide a safe alternative to the streets for addicts to inject drugs. Sterile syringes and water are provided, and nurses oversee injections to help prevent overdose deaths and to offer addiction counselling.

Benedikt Fischer, a senior researcher with the Canadian Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto, said yesterday that studies of such facilities have shown that most injectors don't use them for the majority of their drug hits.

Someone who is hooked on heroin or cocaine, and may inject up to 20 times a day, is not going to wait in line at an injection clinic after scoring drugs from a dealer, he said. Most will shoot up on the street, in a vehicle or back alley -- and that may involve using contaminated needles.

In a Lancet editorial, Wayne Hall of the University of Queensland in Australia agrees that only a fraction of Vancouver's drug injectors use **InSite**.

"It is generally optimistic to expect a single facility to reduce overdose deaths and infections by blood-borne viruses in the community, even if the facility is shown to reduce risk behaviour in patrons," Hall writes.

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