

Safe-injection site in Victoria fine with B.C.'s top doctor

Dr. Perry Kendall says needle drug users are a health-care concern, and the capital's mayor agrees

BY MALCOLM CURTIS

VICTORIA | B.C.'s chief medical health doctor has weighed in on the debate about a safe drug injection site for Victoria, saying that such a facility is needed for the city.

"Speaking as a provincial health officer, I think it would be appropriate," Dr. Perry Kendall said Friday.

The use of illegal drugs administered by needles is an "acknowledged problem" in Victoria reflected by repeated overdoses and health issues like HIV and Hepatitis C, he said.

Diseases are spread through the sharing of needles and drug users are shooting up openly in public areas, Kendall said. The city's needle exchange centre has more than 2,000 clients, he noted.

Mayor Alan Lowe has mused out loud about making Victoria the second city in North America with an officially supervised injection site, following Vancouver's example.

"We've been hearing about people shooting up in the alleys, people shooting up in people's front yards, around people's businesses and schools," Lowe told a forum attended by 200 people last week. "In order to deal with some of those problems we do need a safe injection site."

Vancouver's site opened on a three-year trial basis last September in the city's Downtown Eastside. Former Vancouver mayor Philip Owen, who has been travelling around the country to talk about the experience, told the forum of the benefits of the site, used by 500 drug addicts daily.

The facility is part of a "four pillars" approach to dealing with drug addicts — prevention, harm reduction, treatment and enforcement.

Kendall said early indications suggest the Vancouver experiment is a success, resulting in less drug use in public areas and support from neighbours.

Any bid by Victoria for a similar site would require community support, he said. It will also need to be approved by Health Canada for an exemption under section 56 of the Controlled

Drugs and Substances Act. Vancouver obtained its exemption to conduct a "scientific research pilot project."

Funding would be an issue for any such facility in Victoria with the Vancouver Island Health Authority one likely source of cash, in addition to the provincial Health Ministry.

Vancouver received a grant of \$1.5 million from Ottawa and \$3.2 million from the provincial government.

Earlier this month, the International Narcotics Control Board, an independent United Nations organization, took a swipe at the Vancouver operation. In



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a report, it criticized the injection site for allowing people to "inject drugs acquired on the illicit market with impunity" and suggested that Canada is violating international drug treaties it signed.

However, Kendall, who co-chaired a panel into the feasibility of such facilities from 1999-2001, said it concluded that injection sites meet the requirements of such treaties provided they are used for medical and social service reasons.

Vancouver Mayor Larry Campbell dismissed the UN group. He said it is mostly funded by the U.S., which does not support any "harm reduction" drug programs, preferring to fight a "war on drugs" through enforcement, a policy that Canadian officials feel is not working.

Victoria-Beacon Hill MLA Jeff Bray, who has said Victoria did not need a safe injection site, admitted Friday he has changed his mind after last week's forum.

Bray said he was "surprised" by how many people support such a site and now thinks such a facility could be useful. But it may be that several "satellite" injection sites are needed rather than a central facility that could attract drug users from outside Victoria, he said.

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