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THE NEWSPAPER'S VIEW

Evidence demonstrates Conservatives should keep supporting Insite

In the next few months, the federal government will decide whether to continue supporting Insite, Vancouver's supervised injection facility.

For the sake of everyone in the Lower Mainland, the Conservatives should throw their support behind, not just continuing, but expanding the program.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper and other Conservatives have expressed reservations about Insite, but the feds maintain that they will look at the evidence before making any decision. If they do, they will find that it resoundingly supports continuation of the facility.

About a dozen studies have thus far been conducted, and all suggest the site has had a positive impact on the region.

An early study published in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* found that the opening of the site led to a significant decrease in public disorder, including the number of syringes and injection-related litter discarded in public.

A subsequent study in the medical journal *The Lancet* found that regular users of the site are less likely to share needles than those who don't go to it. (This is so even when regular site users inject drugs elsewhere, as occasionally happens.) Since needle-sharing is one of the main avenues for blood-borne disease transmission, there's reason to believe the site is helping keep down the rates of HIV and hepatitis C infections.

A further study in the *American Journal of Infectious Diseases* replicated *The Lancet* study's results, and found there was zero needle-sharing among the site's users.

with injection drug use. Two separate studies, in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* and the *Journal of Public Health*, found that soft-tissue infections (skin abscesses and the like) are by far the most common reasons drug users wind up in hospital emergency rooms.

Since Insite staff educate addicts concerning safer injection — a study in *The International Journal of Drug Policy* found that Insite users were twice as likely to have received safer-injection education than those who inject on the street — it's reasonable to believe that the site is also keeping down emergency room visits among addicts.

Instructing people about how to use drugs might sound to the site's detractors like staff are facilitating drug use. But a study published in the *British Medical Journal* found that Insite is not increasing rates of relapse among former users, nor is it a negative influence on those seeking to stop drug use.

Further, a paper awaiting publication in the journal *Substance Abuse Treatment, Prevention and Policy* looked at police data and found that there has been no increase in drug-related crime, including property crime, since the site opened.

Finally, according to a study discussed at the recent International Harm Reduction Conference in Vancouver, there were 344 overdoses during Insite's first 18 months of operation, but none resulted in a fatality because those who overdosed received prompt medical attention.

All of this evidence led Julio Montaner, director the B.C. Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, which is

Perhaps one of the most important studies to date was published in the *American Journal for Preventative Medicine*. The study found that the site was primarily attracting high-risk drug users, including those under 30 years of age, the homeless, public drug users (as opposed to those who use at home), daily users of either heroin or cocaine, and those who had recently overdosed.

All of these factors increase the risk of blood-borne disease transmission and further overdoses, and also increase the likelihood of contributing to the problem of public drug use and unsafe disposal of syringes. So it's a positive sign that high-risk users are availing themselves of the site in disproportionate numbers.

Moreover, many high-risk users suffer from skin problems associated

charged with evaluating the site, to conclude that Insite is the single most successful project he has studied.

The centre therefore recommends that the site remain open, and be subject to further external evaluation and monitoring. In addition, the centre advises that the hours of, and number of, sites be expanded and integrated into a more comprehensive program involving detox and treatment services, health care and social housing.

These are eminently reasonable recommendations and ought to resonate not just with those who value harm reduction, but also with those who favour more emphasis on treatment.

If the federal government is serious about tackling the drug problem, it will give its stamp of approval to the continuation and expansion of these life-saving measures.