

Wanted: Champion to take on fears

Times Colonist (Victoria)
Sunday, November 6, 2005
Page: A3
Section: News
Byline: Rob Shaw
Source: Times Colonist



Darren Stone, Times Colonist
Registered nurse Stephanie Gin
prepares an injection site at the
Dr. Peter Centre in Vancouver.

It was a political dust-up the likes of which Vancouver rarely sees and Victoria could hardly imagine. Years of lobbying, lengthy city council debates, heated public forums, protest marches and a municipal election almost entirely dominated by a single issue.

Finally, in September 2003, the end result -- Vancouver's own supervised drug injection site.

Now, Victoria wants one.

The mayors behind Vancouver's trail-blazing rise to become the first city in North America with supervised injection offer simple advice to do it here: Find a political champion to push through the hurdles of "fear" and "ignorance" around safe drug consumption.

"You've already got injection sites all across Victoria," said former Vancouver mayor Philip Owen.

"They are around city hall, outside [mayor] Alan Lowe's office. And they are not safe."

Owen is widely regarded as Vancouver's political champion of safe injection. He developed the city's four-pillars drug plan, and pushed the idea of a safe injection site through council in May, 2002.

An average of about 650 users daily visit Insite, Vancouver's downtown eastside injection site. While in the clean confines of the East Hastings Street site, they can find sterile equipment to inject drugs such as heroin, cocaine and morphine. Medical staff provide help if they overdose, and use a "chill out" room to provide referrals to addiction counselling.

And while most agree Victoria does not suffer public drug use on the same scale as Vancouver, the city has spent years slowly lining up the pieces for its own site.

This summer, Victoria hosted a series of public forums on the topic. Lowe toured sites first-hand in Switzerland and Germany in May. City councillor Dean Fortin and Victoria-Hillside MLA Rob Fleming visited Vancouver's Insite in September.

"You've got so many retired people, and right-wing thinkers there in Victoria," said Owen. "It's a case of time. Go through the process. Go slow. Don't shove anything down their throats. Encourage them for a dialogue."

He added: "But you need political leadership" to push the project into action when the time is right and the community is ready. An open dialogue, and time, brought Vancouver residents on side, said Owen.

Vancouver hosted about 65 public meetings to discuss its four pillars plan: prevention, treatment, housing and enforcement. Victoria has since adopted a similar harm-reduction policy.

Still, not everyone was convinced. Some, such as business leaders in Gastown and Chinatown, stormed Owen's office for meetings and protests. Meanwhile, pro-safe consumption advocates --some of which had already opened a makeshift illegal safe injection site -- held rallies and marches demanding action.

Owen eventually lost the support of his political party, the Non-Partisan Association, because he kept pushing for safe injection. He chose not to run in 2002 for a fourth term as mayor.

"There is fear at the beginning, but you have to deal with it," said Owen. "The fear is from ignorance, and the fear is from an extremely right-wing person, thinking politically, who has blinders on."

The most recent research by the B.C. Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS indicates safe injection has reduced public drug use and saved lives by allowing the most at-risk users with diseases to safely inject drugs they were using regardless. In two years, there have been no overdose deaths.

The critics "are eating humble pie like crazy" said Owen.

Current mayor Larry Campbell, who won the job when Owen bowed out in 2002, said convincing Victoria residents to back a safe injection site will be a "leap of faith" just like in Vancouver.

"The first leap you have to come to is that this is a medical problem," he said. "It will never be solved as a criminal problem. Never."

He said a community can't ignore its critics. It has to bring them "into the tent" and part of the discussion on where, when and how to start a drug use solution.

"The fears were that a supervised injection site would become a honey bucket and draw addicts," he said.

"We knew that wasn't going to happen ... and it never did happen. They were afraid of the degradation of their neighbourhood when in fact we're turning it around."

Campbell vowed to come over to Victoria with experts, users and city staff to explain the value of safe injection if and when Victoria wants to hear it.

"How we can help Victoria is that we've gone forward on this, so we have a proven site and we know how to go about running it," said Campbell.

"We're willing to do whatever we can to help."

Illustration:

- Photo: Darren Stone, Times Colonist / Registered nurse Stephanie Gin prepares an injection site at the Dr. Peter Centre in Vancouver.

Idnumber: 200511060103

Edition: Final

Story Type: News

Length: 756 words

Illustration Type: Black & White Photo