

Two centres, different approaches

Times Colonist (Victoria)
Saturday, October 1, 2005
Page: A2
Section: News
Byline: Rob Shaw
Source: Times Colonist

The two Vancouver centres toured by Victoria politicians Friday offer different approaches to the safe injection site model. Yet a made-in-Victoria site would likely fall somewhere between the way these two facilities offer services, say MLA Rob Fleming and Coun. Dean Fortin.

Insite is focused mainly on serving the high drug use population that flows outside its newly renovated doors on East Hastings Street.

At 10 a.m. Friday, just before opening, a lineup of at least 10 people was already outside. Inside, drug users register with a nickname that tracks their usage statistics on Insite computers, said Jeff West, a Coastal Health Authority employee who is called the centre's "responsible person in charge."

Drug users enter a clean, bright, white waiting room, and then into the main injection centre, which is behind locked doors. Here, eight staff monitor 12 mirrored injection booths in a dark room, lit only by focused lamps to provide a calm mood. Sterile injection paraphernalia, matches, lighters and syringes sit in baskets at the front of the room.

If users overdose or have health problems, a nursing station is in an adjacent room.

Once done, drug users move to a "chill-out lounge," said West, where juice and coffee are served and staff make addiction treatment referrals.

The visits take an average of 20 to 25 minutes, he said.

Insite and the Coastal Health Authority have also leased a nearby building and plan to provide immediate detox beds for eight to 10 people looking to kick their addictions before entering treatment.

While neighbourhood groups such as the business community opposed the Insite location at first, they have now "done a 180" and are encouraging a 24-hour operating schedule, said West.

Despite an improving reputation, it is difficult to get a taxi cab outside Insite, because some cab drivers say they find the area dangerous.

By contrast, less than three kilometres away, in the tree-lined quaint West End neighbourhood that houses the Dr. Peter Centre on Comox Street, cabs are easier to find. A neighbouring Starbucks donates coffee to the centre.

The four-floor facility -- a mixture of gleaming glass and concrete connected to an old house -- has fireplaces, leather couches, cafeteria, day health facilities, libraries, a patio with a waterfall, music room and massage table.

The centre's walls are brightened by paintings made in a fully stocked art room.

With a focus on "comfort care," "dignity" and a "social milieu" that extends beyond safe injections, the Dr. Peter Centre provides a support network to users, both permanent residents and day users, said Maxine Davis, executive director.

The centre is named after Dr. Peter Jepson-Young, who grew up in Nanaimo, worked as a physician in B.C., and died in 1992 after contracting AIDS.

The Dr. Peter Centre is open only to those who suffer from HIV/AIDS. Registered users are able to inject drugs in one of the 24 residential apartments, but are first asked to tell a nurse, said Davis.

A dedicated safe-injection room, with three stalls and an on-duty nurse, as well as a "tweaking box" to ease drug-related reactions, are on the second floor beside two nap rooms. Each of the centre's rooms, including those with computers and big-screen televisions, is funded and equipped by private donations.

"The added value to this place ... is that many people use it as a stepping stone to get out of the Downtown Eastside," Davis said.

WHERE IS VICTORIA AT?

Despite several fact-finding missions, a safe-injection site in Victoria remains nothing more than wishful thinking.

Before such a site could break ground in the city, it would need a Health Canada exemption from the Controlled Substances Act, which would allow for illegal drug use on the premises. The two safe injection sites in Vancouver were the first in Canada to obtain such an exemption. Health Canada has not granted any others.

As well, Victoria city council would have to approve a location and vote on proper permits. The city police would be consulted for approval.

To fund the site, the Vancouver Island Health Authority would need to allocate an annual budget. Provincial and federal governments would likely provide financial assistance. Private fundraising might be needed.

Besides Friday's fact-finding mission to Vancouver -- a first tour of the sites for MLA Rob Fleming, Coun. Dean Fortin and policy developer Marianne Alto -- Victoria Mayor Alan Lowe has travelled to Europe to view safe injection sites.

This summer, the city held a series of public forums to discuss the idea.

SITES AT A GLANCE

Insite -- 139 East Hastings St., VANCOUVER

- Open 18 hours a day, from 10 a.m. to 4 a.m.
- Annual budget: \$2 million.
- Year two of a three-year Health Canada trial.
- Funded by the Coastal Health Authority, with research support by Health Canada and renovation costs by the province.
- Average of 611 daily safe injection users.
- 197 overdoses from 116 clients on site between September 2004 and August 2005, but no deaths. (Average of one serious overdose every two or three days.)

- Three assaults on staff in two years.
- 1,066 users referred to addiction counselling in 2005.
- 90 per cent of drug users live outside Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.
- Security cameras in every room.
- Supporters say the centre reduces AIDS/HIV spread from contaminated needles, as well as infectious diseases such as hepatitis, and reduces the public street use of drugs.
- Critics say the research is inconclusive, and the site has little idea of whether its referrals to counselling are successful.

Dr. Peter Centre -- 1110 Comox St., VANCOUVER

- Day health care. 24-hour nursing care in residences.
- Annual budget: \$4 million
- Year two of a three-year Health Canada trial
- Average of 300 yearly safe injection users. About 275 regular day health users. 24 apartments.
- Staff have reported no overdoses.
- Eight deaths in the centre in the past seven weeks, five in residence and three in day care.
- Different services are funded by B.C. Housing, Coastal Health Authority, \$500,000 of private donations, and the provincial government.
- Users must be HIV positive and apply to use the safe injection site, or the day-care services.
- After a year at the site, drug users use 98 per cent fewer acute beds in hospitals and health care centres, reducing costs, the centre says.

Sources: Interviews, Coastal Health Authority, Dr. Peter Centre, and B.C. Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS

Illustration:

- Photo: Darren Stone, Times Colonist / Registered nurse Sam Milligan at Insite: clean, bright and white.
- Photo: Darren Stone, Times Colonist / A kit supplied to users at Insite.
- Photo: Darren Stone, Times Colonist / Registered nurse Stephanie Gin at Dr. Peter Centre, a Starbucks nearby.

Idnumber: 200510010144

Edition: Final

Story Type: News

Note: Ran with fact boxes, "Where Is Victoria At?" and "Sites at a Glance", which have been appended to the story.

Length: 1075 words

Illustration Type: Black & White Photo