No fatal overdoses means site works; proponents
Numbers suggest safe-injection site reaches
target audience and has saved lives

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VANCOUVER | The fact that there have been no deaths at Vancouver's controversial safe-injection site, even though there were 107 overdoses among 72 clients in the last six months, proves that it is saving lives, say the site's proponents.

The numbers were collected between March 10 and Aug. 31 by a research team at the B.C. Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS as part of an overall evaluation of the project.

"I think we can say the site works because we're reaching the target population it was designed to reach, we're intervening appropriately when overdose incidents happen and we haven't had anyone die here," said Dr. David Marsh, clinical director of addiction services for Vancouver Coastal Health, one of the partners in what operators refer to as a supervised injection site. Its official name is Insite.

Marsh said it is difficult to calculate how many lives the site has saved because drug users who overdose often recover without intervention.

But he noted the death rate among injection-drug users is two to three per cent. And in one of the overdose cases, site staff had to use CPR on a patient before an ambulance arrived.

The data showed the site has seen, on average, 588 users per day, and among them staff have referred 362 to addiction-counselling services, 78 to detox and at least one user per week has gone on a methadone program.

The data showed the busiest times centre around so-called "welfare Wednesdays."

The busiest day was July 28, when 845 users, some 47 per hour, circulated through the site during its 18-hour day.

Marsh said he was also encouraged by the satisfaction rating, which showed 95 per cent of clients rated the site's service as either excellent or good.

Support for the site hasn't been universal, however. It has been criticized as sanctioning illegal drug use, and Downtown Eastside business owners have complained about junkies being drawn to the neighbourhood.

But Marsh said the survey found 68 per cent of users live in the Downtown Eastside, one-third residing within three blocks of the site.

A survey of 117 neighbour-