

No fatal overdoses means site works: proponents

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Numbers suggest safe-injection site reaches target audience and has saved lives

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VANCOUVER SUN

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

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Site sees 588 users per day, on average

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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 262 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-

hood businesses found 46 per cent favoured the site, 34 per cent opposed it and 20 per cent were undecided.

Those who collected the data about the site characterized it as process information that should not be regarded as conclusive about the site's effectiveness in getting people into addiction treatment or reducing the spread of HIV and hepatitis infections.

Dr. Mark Tyndall, program director of epidemiology at the B.C. Centre of Excellence for HIV/AIDS, said those kinds of conclusions will take another year or more to firm up, but the evaluation team is following a group of 800 regular users to address those issues.

Further details of the evaluation team's work will be published Tuesday in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*.

Tyndall said his team will be able to compare the results from the study on safe-injection-site users with those from two other major public-health studies he is conducting in the Downtown Eastside.

One is a long-term study of the health of 1,500 injection-drug users. The other is looking at 3,000 Downtown Eastside residents.

"It's one thing to be able to follow people who have decided to use [the injection site]," he said.

"it's just as important to find out what's happening with people who haven't decided to use it."