

Constructive leadership needed on drug sites

Vancouver's safe-injection program faces a lot of ignorance

Politicians will say anything to avoid addressing difficult issues directly by stating what they really think. Sometimes they're so busy avoiding the issue that they don't even bother to fully consider it. That's one possible explanation for Greater Vancouver regional district chairman Marvin Hunt's remark to *The Vancouver Sun* this week on the city of Vancouver's "four pillar" approach to drug addiction.

Mr. Hunt, a veteran councillor from Surrey chosen as the GVRD chair last month, said Lower Mainland governments shouldn't spend their energy on the harm reduction pillar, which includes supervised injection sites. "Basic geometry says a triangle, with three supports, is the strongest and most stable shape."

That kind of logic suggests there should be an abundance of three-legged animals, triangular buildings and three-step Alcoholics Anonymous recovery programs.

Mr. Hunt also says he doesn't believe the GVRD is an appropriate forum for discussion of a regional approach to drug-addiction strategy — that it's a matter for local governments.

That kind of logic partly explains the wave of municipal amalgamations that has occurred in eastern Canada, after balkanized municipal governments failed to find ways to work effectively together on key issues that overlap jurisdictional boundaries.

Mr. Hunt was reacting to an Ipsos-Reid poll that found 50 per cent of Lower Mainlanders outside Vancouver support the creation of places in their own communities where drug addicts could inject themselves under medical supervision and also be referred for treatment. He says he doubts those numbers reflect public opinion in Surrey.

"I would suggest to you that, generally, the citizens of Surrey would prefer to focus on rehabilitation and detox," Mr. Hunt said. Perhaps no one has explained to him that one key reason for establishing supervised injection sites is that they open the door to rehabilitation and detox.

The most likely reason for Mr. Hunt's specious arguments, though, is that he simply wants to talk around the issue. As politics has clearly taught us, expecting widespread leadership on a critical matter that affects us all — through the crime it spawns and the lives it takes — is really more than we can ask.

So we don't want to be too hard on him for taking the "three legs good" position on injection-drug strategy. After all, Mr. Hunt's remarks aren't the most foolish things to be said about harm-reduction.

Ontario Health Minister Tony

contact that gets some addicts into treatment.

B.C. Alliance MP Randy White says the sites "are nothing but a magnet for drug addicts from all over the country, plus the United States, to go to Vancouver." It's the drugs and the people who use and sell them that draw addicts to the Downtown Eastside, not a clean place that offers a route out of addiction.

Surrey Councillor Gary Tymoschuk told *The Sun* that supervised injection sites tell people it's okay to use drugs. Only viewing the sites in isolation, apart from their place in a strategy of increased enforcement and treatment, allows that simple-minded conclusion.

Mr. Tymoschuk did, however, make one important point when he spoke to *The Sun* about the issue. He said that Vancouver Mayor Larry Campbell,

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who was elected in part because Vancouverites want to see prompt implementation of all four pillars of the city's drug strategy, should take the time to meet with Surrey councillors and discuss the subject.

We're with him on that.

Mr. Campbell well understands that ignorance about what harm reduction really entails is the biggest obstacle to a constructive, comprehensive approach to addiction.

Yet, so far, his approach to dealing with intransigent attitudes in Surrey has been to threaten the municipality. During the fall civic election campaign, he said he would "punish" Surrey if it drove addicts out of the municipality and into Vancouver by restricting treatment options. He was reacting to Surrey's move to raise licence fees for stand-alone methadone clinics to \$10,000 annually from \$195.

That's not a constructive way to begin a dialogue with your neighbours. Mr. Campbell owes it to Surrey — which raised the fees after eight stand-alone methadone clinics opened in a two-block area — to meet with its council and discuss these complex issues, so that we can create solutions that work for all of us.

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Ontario Health Minister Tony Clement said the expression "safe injection site" is an oxymoron. Never mind the experience of several international cities that suggests the sites get users and their needles off the streets, reduce the incidence of AIDS and hepatitis C, protect against overdose deaths and provide a point of

approach to addiction.

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Effectively drawing an addict into treatment requires a sophisticated, comprehensive approach. Dealing with those who fear that approach's most contentious aspects also requires sophistication.

It's only by showing everyone affected by drug addiction what a well-executed harm-reduction strategy can do that we'll be able to create an environment where it will work.

And there's clearly a lot of ignorance for us to overcome.

There are humane alternatives to destroying miscreant animals

It has been nearly two weeks since Shenica White was mauled by two dogs while walking with a friend late at night in East Vancouver. Since then, the 14-year-old has had surgery to repair severe facial damage and will need many further surgeries. Still, she has said she bears no malice toward the dogs.

On Thursday, the dogs, Fanshe and Chichi, both around five, were euthanized at the Vancouver City Pound. They were known to the pound, having twice been found wandering loose before the incident involving Ms. White.

According to a pound spokesman, they exhibited no signs of aggression and appeared timid and fearful in their pound cages.

The owner of the mastiff-Rottweiler cross dogs, whose identity hasn't been made public, lives in Surrey. He'd been keeping the licensed animals at his mother's East Vancouver residence. He immediately agreed to sign a kill order after the mauling, and in fact had little choice.

Had he refused, the city would have sought a court order to have the dogs killed, under the Livestock Protection Act.

The question that remains — beyond why two pet dogs would engage in such an attack — is whether society's response to such events is the best one. That is, is it always the

best course to respond in knee-jerk fashion and kill animals that have shown unacceptable aggression?

While it may not be so in this case, we all know that animals can be let down badly by irresponsible owners who may abuse, neglect or fail to properly socialize their charges. Just recently, Vancouverites learned of several instances where dogs had been deposited, like so much garbage, in dumpsters.

And there are alternatives to destroying miscreant animals. Charles Butler, a Surrey businessman, operates an outfit called Big Dog Rescue. He has purchased land in Likely, in the Cariboo, which he is equipping with kennels. The centre will be a sanctuary for large dogs requiring rehabilitation or refuge.

In fact, Mr. Butler was feverishly trying to arrange to take responsibility for Chichi and Fanshe, at the time they were being euthanized. His plan had been to take them to Likely where they'd be cared for, but never put up for adoption or allowed to return to normal society. Mr. Butler cannot see what purpose was served by killing the dogs.

Perhaps it is time for our community to debate the issue of what to do with such animals on a case-by-case basis and, where appropriate, consider courses that are more humane than simply putting them down.