

## Harm Reduction on Crack!

Posted by

Saturday, 14 October 2006 03:52 - Last Updated Saturday, 14 October 2006 03:52

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**PEJ News** - Derek Book - I'm sure there is a bunch of literature out there claiming that safe injection sites and other harm reduction strategies are the more acceptable way to deal with addiction issues. I just want to summarize the topic for those who may have just joined the discussion (hmmm, where have you been??), and to lend support to the most progressive ideas of our time.

[www.PEJ.org](http://www.PEJ.org)

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**Derek Book**

**PEJ News**

October 14, 2006

There is a lot of talk in Victoria about opening a safe injection site similar to "[Insite](#)" in Vancouver. There are a lot of good reasons for opening such a site that go beyond harm reduction. Insite has thus far shown itself to be a community contributor, as well as a life saver for addicts.

The program I am suggesting goes several steps further. I think we need a "campus" of addiction care that provides safe injection/consumption areas, a drop-in center with an outdoor courtyard, a shelter/housing area with a meal plan, and team of health care and community care workers. This campus would prescribe clean and regulated cocaine and heroin through an onsite doctor, and develop a drug management plan with each user. Abstinence would be encouraged and supported, but not forced. The program would be covered under

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the health care system... free to drug users. It would be a long term situation for some, and a temporary solution for others. This campus would have strong ties to detox and drug rehab centers, as well as to other community supports.

Following are the top ten reasons why an addiction treatment campus would be better for our communities:

- 1) So much mental, emotional, and physical energy of drug users is spent on getting drugs. This energy can be spent on developing or using community supports, but so often, the addict is merely trying to get high. With prescribed heroin or cocaine, the addict can focus energy on personal growth instead.
  
- 2) I don't need to refer to stats to explain the relationship between drugs and crime. If hard drugs were available through the health care system, the community would see less violent and non-violent crime. There would be less victims, less cost to police departments, and more money to be spent on the health and well being of all citizens.
  
- 3) A "campus" model of addiction care would dramatically reduce health care costs. Because housing, medical care, and community supports would be included in the package, costs to other local shelters, emergency wards, and community services would be reduced. Many addicts tap into the current health care system on a regular basis, which cost tens of thousands per year per addict.
  
- 4) City streets, alleyways, and parking lots have become "uglified" with gates, fences, and physical deterrents to drug users. These security features would not be needed as much if society provided a safe place to use. Local restaurants would not have to worry about shooting up when they provide access to their washrooms.

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5) Safe injection=safe disposal. If addicts have a safe place to use, hang out, and are not worried about being caught with syringes, those syringes will not end up in parks, crammed down toilets, or in some other place where an innocent person will get stuck.

6) So much mental and physical damage results from street drugs being "cut" with some cheaper substance. A lot of deaths occur when crystalized methodone gets mixed with heroin, for example. A prescribed heroin or cocaine program would ensure that the dosage would be regulated and safe.

7) If these drugs were prescribed, then the government of Canada would be the "dealer," and it is unlikely that the government will "push" drugs on young people, as current street dealers do. Street dealing would be greatly minimized, as it is really hard to compete with a "free" price.

8) Because of the housing and "drop in" nature of the program I am suggesting, there would be less of a gathering of drug users on streets where people do not want them. Many businesses are getting more and more frustrated with drug users on their doorsteps. Creating a safe place for drug users would help alleviate the tension in downtown areas.

9) Drug users would have a chance to interact with health care professionals and addiction specialists while picking up their daily dosage. This means that users will have opportunities for referrals, emotional support, or withdrawal management on a regular basis-- something not as likely to happen when you visit your drug dealer.

10) The spread of HIV and Hepatitis would be reduced, along with other serious drug-related illnesses.

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These are some of the reasons. I want to stress that this kind of program is only compassionate if abstinence is encouraged, and I also want to stress that HOW the program is run will make all the difference. Progressive, present, and dynamic staff will be required, and the connections with other community services (Police, Health Authorities, etc) must be solid. It could be run as a study, but there is enough evidence to justify a permanent program already. Furthermore, the cost savings to the health care and the criminal justice system are tangible and immediately recoverable.

This is not a "giving up," or a "giving in," this is the next progressive step in a battle with a medical condition that affects every inch of Canadian Society. I will say it once again, for those who missed it: Until we treat addiction as an illness, we will have no progress.

**Derek Book** is the creator of [Formerly Homeless](#), a blog about homelessness in Canada