

Safe-injection sites too effective to shoot down

Harper and the Conservatives have avoided the issue of drug clinics so far, but as Insite's trial run draws to a close, the time has never been better for the government to take a stance



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Let's make one thing clear: Safe- or Supervised-Injection Sites (SISs), clinics where drug addicts inject themselves with narcotics under the supervision of health care professionals, are illegal in Canada. Their very existence violates our country's drug laws, and the only reason Vancouver's Insite clinic—the only one of its kind in North America—exists is due to a temporary exemption implemented (under Section 56 of the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, in case you're interested) by then-PM Paul Martin and his Liberal government.

This three-year trial run expires next month, and the pressure is now on Stephen Harper's Conservative government to decide whether to allow clinics such as Insite to operate.

Harper made his position clear on this issue when he was elected back in January: he's "philosophically opposed" to the idea of SISs, but would wait until evidence of the site's effectiveness was gathered before making a final decision.

This was and is a very reasonable position; in fact, even if Harper was philosophically in favour of SISs, he

ought to have done the same thing, for it's the solemn responsibility of our policymakers to gather as much valid, empirical data as possible before making such an important and precedent-setting decision.

There are several criticisms of SISs that typically get hauled out: that they promote drug use, that they encourage dependence, that they increase crime in the neighbourhoods in which they're situated, that they simply don't work—and, by extension, a waste of taxpayers' money, that cardinal governmental sin. Without studying it any further, then, many would likely agree with Harper's stance on this issue.

The studies have been done, however, and the evidence overwhelmingly indicates that Insite is effective, not only in the prevention of infection among users, but also in helping free users from addiction altogether. SISs offer clean needles for users, unlike the dirty, HIV-infected needles found on the streets; these clinics also offer nurses and doctors who provide medical services, as well as counsellors that guide addicts toward recovery. In other words, SISs don't promote drug use; rather, they promote clean, safe use for addicts and encourage them to recover and kick the habit.

Numerous studies have been conducted both by outside researchers and within the Vancouver clinic itself, including a report released last week conducted by the BC Centre

for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, which found that "three-quarters of Insite users report the facility has positively changed their injecting behaviour." Local governments and police, the RCMP, and former addicts alike all attest to the progress made.

Despite this seemingly irrefutable evidence, Harper and his Conservatives have remained stubbornly silent on the issue, even despite earlier promises to make their position clear by the end of the recent International AIDS conference held earlier this month in Toronto—an event which our PM notoriously failed to attend.

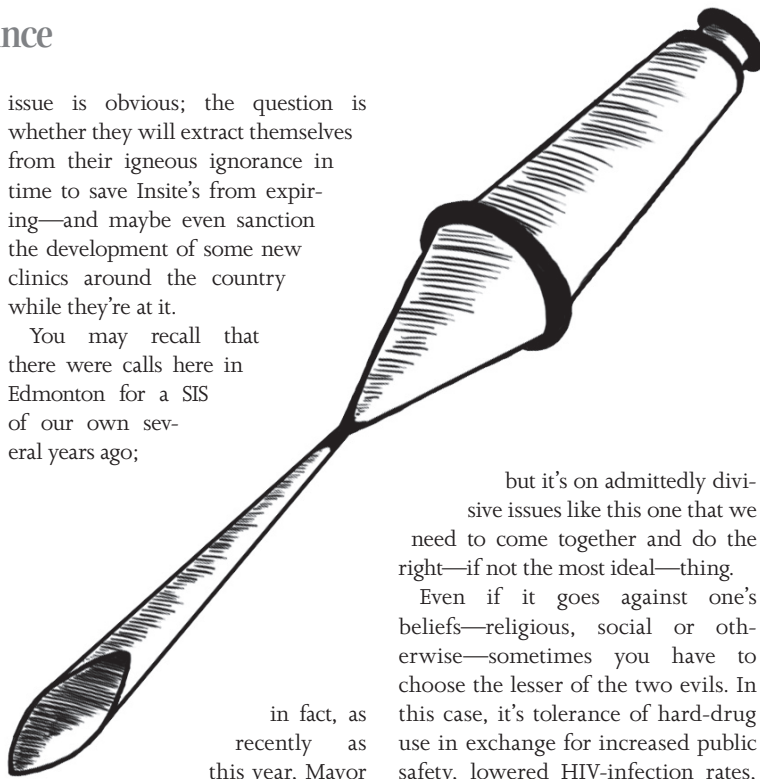
Instead, Harper later defended his absence, pointing out correctly that he can't accept every invitation he's offered, and that he wasn't going to comment on the issue while it was "so politicized." He's damn right it's politicized—isn't politics what he does for a living?

To be fair, Federal Health Minister Tony Clement was in attendance, and pragmatically speaking, it's probably better to have a real live bureaucrat there than a political figurehead. But we all know the influence figureheads have on public perception, and in this sense, Harper's snubbing of the conference doesn't bode well for his government's still-to-be-announced position on SISs like Insite.

That the Conservatives have their heads deep below the sand on this

issue is obvious; the question is whether they will extract themselves from their igneous ignorance in time to save Insite's from expiring—and maybe even sanction the development of some new clinics around the country while they're at it.

You may recall that there were calls here in Edmonton for a SIS of our own several years ago;



but it's on admittedly divisive issues like this one that we need to come together and do the right—if not the most ideal—thing.

Even if it goes against one's beliefs—religious, social or otherwise—sometimes you have to choose the lesser of the two evils. In this case, it's tolerance of hard-drug use in exchange for increased public safety, lowered HIV-infection rates, and the reduction of addicts and users in our country's most drug-addled neighbourhoods. Seems like a pretty clear-cut choice to me.

But this isn't a simplistic issue, and no one—our elected government least among them—can afford to take an ideological position here. Ignoring the effectiveness of SISs has the same effect as pretending that the problem doesn't exist, and going directly against proven science is hopefully a relic of the past.

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