



the foresight of Insite

DISPELLING THE MYTHS OF DRUG ADDICTION ON VANCOUVER'S DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE

VANCOUVER (CUP)—On any given morning on the corner of East Hastings and Columbia in front of the Radio Station Café in Vancouver, a drug dealer can make up to \$35 000. Their customers approach them in a nonchalant fashion, do their business and quickly scuttle off in various directions.

Some may venture back to their hotel rooms, rented out at cheap monthly rates. Many will drift into the nearest alley and quickly dose. But these days, most will probably walk into Insite, the city's highly publicized and contentious safe injection facility, open to all and just eight doors down.

Even on the slowest day, the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VAN DU), estimates that nearly 15 000 heroin injections take place in the Downtown Eastside, and Tyrone Caldwell, 39, used to take his fair share.

Caldwell spent the last 14 years of his life dabbling with different drugs, but it was during the last five years that things began to get really heavy. After nearly a decade of drug use, he lost control, and in order to support his \$300-a-day cocaine habit, started dealing narcotics himself, including heroin.

It was in May that he went into the facility as he did on any normal day. He proceeded into the injection area to shoot up. The area is the width of a desk, with a mirror in front and two walls, giving an individual the suggestion of privacy. Immediately after dosing, Caldwell had an ominous feeling that something was not right.

"The minute the buzz or rush started coming on, I knew it wasn't a cocaine rush," he says. "I knew I was in trouble and that's the last thing I remember."

Caldwell was put into an ambulance after the paramedics gave him a shot of Narcan, a drug that reverses the effects of opiates, to revive him. Caldwell later discovered that what he had injected into himself wasn't just cocaine—it was a nasty trail mix of heroin and cocaine, which led to his overdose. And it was because of the staff at Insite that Caldwell didn't die that day.

"If Insite wasn't there and I was in the alley, I'd be dead," he says.

Caldwell isn't the only one. Since its inception in 2003, Insite has grown in popularity among drug users in the Downtown Eastside, averaging around 700 visits per day. Section 56 of the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act allows Insite—in addition to doctors prescribing methadone for those in rehab—to have legal possession of controlled substances. Because of this exemption, Insite is currently the only place in Canada where a person can legally carry narcotics.

Before Insite, the number of overdoses and rates of infection for HIV and Hepatitis A, B, and C were soaring in the Downtown Eastside community. According to Anne Livingston, a project coordinator for VAN DU, deaths by overdose climbed from 35 in 1989 to 350 in 1994. The 1995 Vancouver Injection Drug User sampled 5000 users in the Downtown Eastside and esti-

ated that the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the area was around 40 per cent while Hepatitis C hovered around 90 per cent.

The community was dying.

With the alarming rates of infection and death escalating rapidly, the city soon realized traditional drug enforcement and treatment strategies were failing. The city subsequently adopted its "Four Pillars Drug Strategy," which consists of harm reduction, prevention, treatment and enforcement. Insite was implemented as a progressive step towards increasing harm reduction, though some argue it promotes all four pillars.

Open 18 hours a day, Insite has become one of the busiest safe-injection facilities in the world. There's no limit to how many times a day a person can use the site. Accounts of its successes have been documented. There are over 7000 registered members and though there have been 500 overdoses, none have resulted in death. Furthermore, Insite has found that users of the site are twice as likely to get into detox.

While there's no evidence yet to suggest that the rates of HIV/AIDS have gone down since Insite opened, neither have there been any studies investigating this issue. It would be counter-intuitive to think that the facility has been anything less than a bastion of prevention.

In spite of this, at the end of August, the future of the facility was in limbo. The federal exemption that allowed Insite to operate was due to expire on 12 September and Canadian Health Minister Tony Clement, rather than extending it another three years, reluctantly bowed to public pressure and renewed the exemption until December 2007. The scientific evidence, according to Clement, was inconclusive.

"Do safe injection sites contribute to lowering drug use and fighting addiction? Right now the only thing research has proven conclusively is that drug addicts need more help to get off drugs," says Clement in a media release. "Given the need for more facts, I am unable to approve the current request to extend the Vancouver site for another three-and-a-half years."

Despite scientific evidence and public support of the facility from all levels of government, the Ministry of Health opted to shy away from granting proponents of the site its full demands—the disconnection between those in Ottawa and the people at the frontlines is unsettling.

Jeff West, a coordinator at Insite, has witnessed first-hand the changes the facility has brought to the Downtown Eastside. He's seen its successes and its failures. His modus operandi is to dispel the myths circulating in Ottawa and educate people about the many other services that Insite provides.

"We teach people. We never hold or touch the needle—that's the bottom line," West says. "[The staff] can tie people off, help them find a vein, [pick] what kind of angle to insert the needle. We also have a prosthetic arm that has veins and use that as a teaching tool."

West stresses the strictness of these guidelines: if someone dies and they have gone beyond their immediate duties, it's an automatic charge of manslaughter.

But the big appeal for Insite, West says, is giving a shelter to the people living in squalor. It provides the lost and hopeless a place to go.

"People are complex souls. Addictions are a result of other stuff going on. Ultimately you could really just focus on the addiction and they can go to detox," West says.

Caldwell and many others attest to the success to this program.

"If Insite wasn't there ... I really wouldn't be here," says Caldwell, who now volunteers at Insite. "I'm living on borrowed time and I'm here to help them. No questions."

When her sister became a crystal methamphetamine addict, Darcy (who is using only her first name to protect her identity) took custody of her sister's children. She was only 22. For the next 25 years, she was an operating engineer in northern BC, making an almost six-figure income for many years.

But after injuring her back and losing the pension she spent her entire life working for, everything came crashing down. She eventually moved to the Balmoral Hotel in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. She had nowhere else to go.

On welfare for the first time of her life, she started using drugs. From A to Z, she did it all, everything except crystal meth—something she promised herself she would never do after seeing it kill her sister.

"It was from 25 years of being straight, I wanted to experience it all. You name it, I did it. My sister was a junkie; it was like I wanted to