

experience what she experienced.”

At the height of her drug addiction she was visiting Insite nearly four times a day.

“What I went for was the congeniality and I’d go there because it’s a nice, clean place. I don’t actually inject anymore.”

She can barely describe some of the atrocities she’s seen because they are so egregious. Before Insite, she says, women were contracting HIV at enormous rates, which she attributes to the fact that women are most vulnerable in the Downtown Eastside.

Often times, she says, prostitutes, too messed up to do their own drugs, ask their pimps to shoot them up. But instead of using a clean needle, her pimp uses a “rake,” a needle that has already made the rounds, which is almost inevitably tainted and ridden with disease.

Insite, she says, offers these women an alternative.

“This is a place where women go to control disease,” she says.

Darcy admits there are many misconceptions about Insite, and says given the lack of understanding about addiction in general, it’s not surprising.

This lack of understanding was clearly shown in an online *Globe and Mail* debate between former mayor of Vancouver and current Senator

“Federal government doesn’t fund any component. Insite doesn’t provide drugs. They aren’t asking for a single red cent, just for the blessing, just for the exemption to be renewed,” he says.

Libby Davies, a proponent of Insite and an NDP MP, echoed Allen’s concerns.

“The evidence [about] Insite is irrefutable, there’s no research that suggests it’s not working as it should be,” Davies says. “They’re dead wrong with the disputes. You can’t ignore the scientific evidence from incredibly reputable sources. It’s been under a microscope for three years. It’s not a panacea for the drug solution, it’s part of the solution.”

Echoing Davies’s concerns, Darcy adds a more extreme viewpoint. She believes that Ottawa has given the addiction situation and Insite a lack of attention, and the subsequent drug-related deaths in the Downtown Eastside area is a form of population control.

“[Drug addicts] are seen as a subhuman species here, but they aren’t. It’s tough to make it as a man down here but it’s even tougher to make it as a woman. They’ll stab you, knife you. That’s the element you have to be in,” Darcy says.

According to VANDU and Insite, every ambulance coming into the Downtown Eastside costs \$1000. Each case of HIV/AIDS costs the health-care system \$320 000. The financial

Livingston, a project coordinator for VANDU who also ran unsuccessfully for city council in 1996 and 1999, says it was this critical pressure from VANDU that finally started to change minds. The municipal government, she says, had repeatedly dropped the idea for the site for a number of years before Insite came to be.

Even with the cynical outlook, Livingston is still lobbying to open four more government-sanctioned sites. One site, she says, isn’t enough.

“It’s the equivalent of your whole body covered in running sores and one patch is cleared up,” she says. “We know it works but we can’t put it on the rest of our bodies. I said, ‘Fuck you, we can’t.’”

Her plan is to put three more sites on the perimeter of the Downtown Eastside. By surrounding the area with sites it would, in theory, be easier for addicts to get to a nearby site.

But the likelihood of three more sites popping up once the exemption expires in December 2007 seems like a stretch. Livingston knows it, and that’s why VANDU is doing whatever it can to help.

The group has already taken the matter into its own hands. If you know what they look like, you can spot them a block away. A team of ten people in fluorescent vests patrol the streets educating and, in many cases, illegally assisting the injections of addicts in the area who are unable to perform them alone.

These rogue patrols complement the limited services Insite can legally provide. Often, people have to be rejected from Insite because they are not capable of injecting their own drugs—and Insite workers cannot do it for them. The patrollers look out for these people in particular.

This squadron of injectors, all trained health-care workers certified in CPR, assist in any way they can. If you’re blind and have an amputated arm, for example, they will help you inject.

“It’s considered illegal,” Livingston admits. “But if I inject you with drugs the joke is that you won’t die. You’re much less likely to die with a trained expert who knows CPR and has gloves on.”

There’s no doubt in Livingston’s mind that if the government in Ottawa decides to pull the plug after December 2007, rogue sites will replace Insite. Before Ottawa announced the extension on 1 September, VANDU and other groups were already getting one ready.

The rumour is that the Portland Hotel Society, a Vancouver-based substance abuse advocacy group, has already built a site.

“The only way to find out is if you find one of their workers and literally follow them around until you see them all going to the same place,” Livingston says.

The future of Insite remains uncertain until December 2007, but there’s no doubt that whatever decision is made in Ottawa, it will not sway supporters of Insite from fighting on behalf of their growing and evolving community.

Livingston can attest to that. If Ottawa says no to an exemption beyond 2007, the gloves are going to come off.

“[Ottawa is] going to mud-wrestle with us,” she says. “I don’t think that they want that because we would win.”

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Larry Campbell and Randy White, the founder of the Drug Prevention Network of Canada held in August, before the extension to the exemption was granted.

During the debate, White, a former Reform-Alliance-Conservative MP and vice-chairman of the parliamentary committee studying the non-medical use of drugs, gave a list of reasons why Insite’s exemption under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act should not have been renewed and why the site should have been shut down.

Among the reasons:

- 1) Injection sites do not prevent and treat drug use.
- 2) Since the opening of the site, Vancouver has become more problematic with crime and addiction, and the injection site has contributed to the problem.
- 3) Responsible government does not sanction a person walking through a door and getting assistance to shoot up crystal meth.
- 4) Injection sites are the exception, not the rule, in most countries worldwide.

Campbell retorted. “To be blunt, [White] is a dinosaur and refuses to even consider scientific, peer-reviewed evidence. I suspect that deep in his mind, he believes the earth is flat.”

The inability to get past archaic misconceptions about the realities of drug use is at the root of the problem, says Nathan Allen, an organizer for Insite for Community Safety, which is an advocate group for Insite.

burden the area once carried has decreased significantly.

Surprisingly, one of the strongest messages of support comes from the Chinatown Merchants Association. Before the site opened, the association was among the most vehemently opposed groups to the injection site. Now they are one of Insite’s biggest supporters.

“There aren’t any people shooting up in front of the businesses anymore and Insite has [shown] by example that it works,” Allen says.

Six to eight hours after the last dose of heroin, a person can begin to have withdrawal symptoms that include severe anxiety, depression, diarrhea, convulsions, vomiting and uncontrollable body movements. Mary Miller used to dose at Insite frequently to avoid these symptoms.

“You don’t want to go sleep because when you wake up you’ll be too sick to move,” she says. To alleviate these symptoms she now gets a portion of her welfare check deducted to pay for her methadone.

Months before the creation of Insite, VANDU, which started in 1998 by a group of intravenous drug users that advocated living healthy and productive lives, opened their own de facto safe injection site for people like Mary.

The rogue site could barely operate and their hours were limited (10 pm to 2 am), but according to Ann Livingston, it was what gave the city the gumption to eventually open a legally sanctioned facility in 2003.

“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 experience what she experienced.”

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