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Insight into *Insite*

Insite, North America's first medically supervised injecting facility, has been open in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside since September 2003. The scientific evaluation of Insite has been carried out by researchers at the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS and the Department of Medicine at the University of British Columbia. The research has been conducted according to the highest ethical standards, and the research methods have been approved by the University of British Columbia–Providence Health Care Research Ethics Board.

Results of the evaluation research have been published in more than 30 articles in the world's leading peer-reviewed scientific and medical journals. This means that scientists from around the world have closely examined the researchers' findings and have accepted their conclusions.

Research Results

So far, the evaluation research has shown that:

1. Insite is being used by the people it was intended for

Before Insite opened, some people doubted that drug users would go to a medically supervised facility to inject their drugs. In fact, the new facility has had no shortage of clients—more than 10,000 individuals have used the facility. Insite is used by those most at risk for overdosing or becoming infected with HIV or hepatitis C. Insite is also used by people who would otherwise inject their drugs in public places.

2. Insite has reduced HIV risk behaviour

Among injection drug users, sharing needles is one of the primary ways that HIV and other blood-borne diseases, such as hepatitis C, are spread. People who use Insite are less likely to share needles.

On the street, for a variety of reasons, many injection drug users seek help from other users when injecting. This sometimes involves sharing needles. At Insite, injection drug users have a chance to learn the least injurious ways of injecting themselves. Users who can inject themselves are less likely to require help from others, and therefore less likely to share needles.

In addition to sterile injecting equipment, condoms are also easily available at Insite. By providing condoms to clients of the facility, Insite promotes safer sex practices and likely helps reduce the spread of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, in the community.

3. Insite promotes treatment of addiction

Once Insite opened, the people who used it were more likely than they were before to enter a detoxification program. People who go into detox are more likely to access addiction treatment and are consequently less likely to use Insite following treatment.

4. Insite has improved public order

After Insite opened, the number of public injections and the amount of injection-related litter near the facility decreased measurably.

5. Insite reduces overdose risk

Drug users sometimes overdose, and drug users have overdosed at Insite. However, by changing the environment in which individuals inject drugs, Insite reduces the risk for overdose. Because medical staff are on site to respond to emergencies, to date the overdoses that have occurred at Insite have not resulted in any deaths. Calculation using a mathematical simulation model has shown that prompt medical attention at Insite may have prevented as many as 48 overdose deaths over a four-year period.

6. Insite provides safety for women who inject drugs

By providing a safe space away from the dangers of the street-based drug scene, Insite reduces the risk of violence against women, particularly violence that occurs before or during the injection process.

7. Insite offers medical care for injection-related infections

Nurses at Insite regularly provide care for injection-related infections and frequently connect drug users with off-site medical treatment. This likely helps to reduce the demand for care for injection-related infections in hospitals.

8. Insite does not lead to increased drug use or increased crime

Insite has not led to increased rates of relapse among former drug users. It has not deterred drug users from quitting using, nor has it deterred users from seeking addiction treatment. Insite has not led users of non-injected drugs to begin injecting.

In the Downtown Eastside, since Insite opened, there has been no increase in drug-related crime, no increase in arrest rates for drug trafficking, no increase in assaults, and no increase in robberies. The rate of vehicle break-ins has declined.

9. Vancouver police play an important role in supporting Insite

Local police have referred a significant number of public injectors to Insite. By referring high-risk public drug users to a health facility, local police are helping both to reduce health-related harms and to promote public order objectives.

The Bigger Picture

Scientific research has shown that Insite has in many ways improved the health and well-being of individuals and communities in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. As one small health-focused initiative, however, Insite cannot be expected to solve all of the many complex and long-standing problems associated with addiction, disease, mental illness, homelessness, and poverty that are characteristic of so many urban settings today. As part of a larger strategy to address these problems, though, medically supervised injecting facilities such as Insite can play an important role.

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