



SUPERVISED INJECTION SITES (SISs) FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: What is a supervised injection site (or “safe injection site”)?

A supervised injection site is a controlled health care setting where drug users inject drugs under supervision and receive health care, counselling, and referral to health and social services, including drug treatment.

Q: What kind of services does the supervised injection site (SIS) provide?

The SIS provides:

- Supervision of injections, including emergency response to drug overdoses;
- Injection-related first aid (such as wound and abscess care);
- Assessment and referral to primary health care and service providers;
- Harm reduction teaching and counselling;
- Exchanges of condoms, needles and other injecting equipment.

Q: Why is there a supervised injection site in Vancouver?

Vancouver has an open drug scene and one of the largest concentrations of injection drug users in North America, centred in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C infection rates for Vancouver’s injection drug users have reached epidemic levels.

Supervised injection sites (SISs) are an immediate harm-reduction measure - the first in a number of steps that need to be taken to build an integrated system of care that has the capacity to address a range of drug addiction issues. Vancouver has moved ahead with harm reduction and the SIS to help prevent the ongoing spread of HIV/AIDS, hepatitis C, and drug overdoses and deaths in the city. SISs function as an important first point of contact for marginalized drug users who cannot be reached by health care providers through traditional means.

Q: What do you hope to achieve with the SIS?

- To improve the overall health of drug users, including reducing the incidence of overdose and disease transmission;
- To reduce the harm associated with illicit drug use (e.g. crime, discarded needles, public drug use);
- To increase appropriate use of health and social services by drug users;
- To reduce health, social, legal and incarceration costs associated with drug use.

Q: The SIS has been open for two months (as of Nov. 2003). Is it achieving what you hoped it would achieve?

It is too early to draw any overall conclusions about the supervised injection site, but early indications are very positive, and suggest the site is working as it should. The supervised injection site has supervised an average of 450 injections per day, or over

11,000 injections since the site opened on September 21, and successfully intervened in 25 overdoses (as of November 8, 2003). Statistically speaking, approximately one-quarter of those overdoses would have ended in death without intervention by a medical professional. Since the site opened, at least 33 people have been referred to detox services. There have been no major public disturbances or incidences of criminal activity at the site. Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) has plans to release regular reports on the progress of the three-year research pilot.

Q: Are there supervised injection sites anywhere else in the world?

Yes. There are SISs in 27 cities worldwide, including Geneva, Zurich, Frankfurt, and Sydney (Australia). Evidence from these sites shows a profound reduction in overdose deaths and the spread of diseases like HIV and hepatitis C, and a dramatic reduction in the open drug scene. Vancouver's supervised injection site is the first of its kind in North America.

Q: What has the experience been in other jurisdictions?

Every jurisdiction is different. In Switzerland, for example, there are 13 legal supervised injection sites, funded either by government or non-government organizations, in the cities of Basel, Bern and Zurich. Most centres are open for approximately seven hours a day, and around 100 clients visit each centre every day.

In Germany, the largest supervised injection site - the Eastside Centre - has been converted by the local government from a factory into a multi-purpose centre for drug users. The site includes a methadone clinic, a needle exchange program, accommodation for 70 people, a café, a workshop, a laundry, a doctor's surgery and an injecting room.

Q: Where are Vancouver's supervised injection sites (SISs) located?

The first SIS is located at 139 East Hastings. A second legal supervised injection site is located at the Dr. Peter Centre at 1110 Comox Street.

Q: Who operates the Hastings supervised injection site (SIS)?

As required by Health Canada, the SIS is operated by Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH), the regional health authority responsible for the delivery of health services within Vancouver. Other on-site operations are carried out in partnership with the Portland Hotel Society, a non-profit organization that brings a wealth of information on treating addiction as a health issue and experience working with the injection drug user community.

Q: What does SIS look like, and how is it run?

The site is a comfortable renovated space in a heritage building on East Hastings. When clients walk through the door, they are assessed and led through a waiting area to a 12-seat injection room where they can inject drugs under the supervision of trained health care staff, who issue clean needles, spoons, tourniquets and water.

After injecting, clients move to a post-injection "chill out" room where staff - if appropriate - may connect clients with other on-site services, including primary health care for treatment of wounds, abscesses and other infections, counselling, and referral to treatment services such as withdrawal management, opiate replacement therapy and other associated services.

The staffing model has a mix of professional health care staff and Portland Hotel Society employees. The site is open 18 hours per day, between 10 a.m. and 4 a.m. The site has the capacity to handle between 600 and 800 injections per day.

Q: What will it cost to operate the SIS?

The total annual cost to operate the SIS and conduct the research study is \$2.5 million. The majority of this funding represents the staffing and supply costs.

Q: Where can I get more information?

For more information on Vancouver's SIS, please contact Naomi Brunemeyer at Vancouver Coastal Health at 1.866.884.0888 or 604.736.7662, or log onto their SIS website at www.vch.ca/sis.

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