

Briefing Note: Responding to the Drug Poisoning Crisis

Produced by: Comox Valley Community Health Network (<https://www.cvchn.ca>)

Prepared for: Federal candidates in North Island – Powell River and Courtenay-Alberni ridings

Purpose: Poisoning deaths from an unsafe supply of drugs is a public health emergency and there is a need for our local Members of Parliament to advocate for drug policy changes to prevent these deaths.

Background: “*Drug poisoning is affecting many different people who use different substances for different reasons. It is affecting people who use opioids, people who use stimulants, people who use regularly and people who use occasionally. People from all walks of life are affected, we are all in this together*” (1). More than **12,800** apparent-opioid related deaths occurred between January 2016 and March 2019 in Canada (2). In 2018 one life was lost every 2 hours related to opioids in Canada (2). In 2019 (January to March), **93%** of apparent opioid-related deaths were accidental (unintentional), occurred among males (**76%**) and the vast majority were among young and middle aged adults (2). This number of preventable deaths has surpassed the total number of deaths of all other Public Health Emergencies in the last 20 years including SARS, H1N1, and Ebola.

Substance use is a normal part of human experience; documented across centuries and all over the world. The current war on drugs has been costly and grossly ineffective and has resulted in widespread stigma towards addiction and against those who use illicit drugs. Criminalization of particular substances has resulted in the establishment of a drug trade that now traffics dangerous and lethal products, such as fentanyl. In 2019 (January to March) **82%** of accidental apparent opioid-related deaths involved fentanyl or fentanyl analogues such as carfentanil (which is 100 times more potent than fentanyl) (2). Problematic substance use is a health issue and is not resolved through criminalizing personal possession and consumption. Decriminalization of personal possession is associated with dramatically reducing overdose deaths in the countries that have modernized their drug policy.

One positive intervention that is currently saving lives is the introduction of “supervised consumption sites” and “overdose prevention sites.” These critical harm reduction services allow people to use drugs safely under the supervision of trained staff and volunteers as well as upholding dignity for people who use drugs. To operate without risk of criminal charges these sites need an exemption from Canada’s drug laws that is granted by the federal government of the day. This results in a public health emergency being vulnerable to changing political contexts. Without an exemption staff, volunteers, and clients are at risk of criminal prosecution for “possessing drugs for personal use”(3).

Each and every day, the criminalization and stigmatization of people who use drugs cost lives and undermines health. Urgent action is required on multiple levels to prevent further deaths from drug poisoning (2).

Current Situation in British Columbia and the Comox Valley:

- In 2015 a significant increase both in number and geographic spread of overdose deaths occurred in BC and the BC Provincial Health Officer declared a public health emergency in April 2016 under the *Public Health Act*; a first in BC and Canada (4).
- Between April 2016 and April 2019 more than 3,700 British Columbians died from overdose deaths—as many as four people a day (4). Overdose deaths have become the leading cause of unnatural death in BC; in 2018, there were 4.5 times more overdose deaths than deaths from motor vehicle crashes (4).

- Rate of overdose deaths in BC for 2018 was 30.8 deaths per 100,000 people (4) and in the Comox Valley deaths rose from 16.5 people per 100,000 in 2016 to 24.2 people per 100,000 in 2017 (5)
- In both BC and Comox Valley there is a disproportionate impact on males age 30 to 59, and among Indigenous people - the vast majority who die are using drugs alone and indoors (4,5).
- In 2012, fentanyl was detected in 5 per cent of illegal drug overdose deaths in BC; by the end of 2018, fentanyl had been detected in 85 per cent of overdose deaths while the number of illegal drug overdose deaths excluding fentanyl has remained relatively stable (4).
- In April 2019, the BC Provincial Health Officer recommended that the Province of BC urgently move to decriminalize people who possess controlled substances for personal use (4).

Recommendations: National leadership is needed to spearhead further action in response to a public health emergency that is unnecessarily killing our citizens. We recommend the federal government:

- Declare the current opioid overdose and fentanyl poisoning crisis a National Public Health Emergency under the Emergencies Act in order to manage and resource it with the aim to reduce and eliminate preventable deaths.
- Reform current drug policy to decriminalize **personal** possession.
- Create with urgency and immediacy a system to provide safe unadulterated access to substances so that people who use substances, experimentally, recreationally or chronically, are not at imminent risk of overdose due to a contaminated source.
- Preserve existing and increase supervised consumption sites to prevent drug poisoning by providing adequate funding for these services

Questions:

If elected, how will you:

1. Ensure that a National Public Health Emergency is declared, and appropriate management and resources go towards the opioid overdose and fentanyl poisoning crisis?
2. Advocate for legislation to decriminalize personal possession and then collaborate with provincial and municipal governments to create a system to provide an accessible safe supply of drugs in Canada?
3. Ensure there are supervised consumption sites available across the country?
4. Work to end the war on drugs, promote addiction as a health issue not a criminal issue and reduce stigma and discrimination related to substance use?

References:

1. City of Vancouver Safe Supply Statement - <https://vancouver.ca/people-programs/safe-supply-statement.aspx>
2. National Report: Apparent Opioid related deaths in Canada September 2019 <https://health-infobase.canada.ca/datalab/national-surveillance-opioid-mortality.html>
3. Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network - <http://www.aidslaw.ca/site/drugs-and-harm-reduction/?lang=en>
4. <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/health/about-bc-s-health-care-system/office-of-the-provincial-health-officer/reports-publications/special-reports/stopping-the-harm-report.pdf>
5. CV Vital signs Report (2018) - <https://cvcfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/Comox-Valley-Vital-Signs-Source-Report.pdf>

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