Supervised Consumption Services –
Service Benefits and Service Development History in Victoria

The Benefits of Supervised Consumption Services

Supervised Consumption Services (SCS) help fill an important role in the continuum of health services. SCS are effective at reducing the harms of illicit substance use, including overdose deaths, bacterial infections and transmission of bloodborne pathogens such as HIV and hepatitis C.

In 2016, the BC Ministry of Health declared a public health emergency in response to an unprecedented rise in overdose deaths across the Province. Island Health has experienced the largest rate increase in overdose deaths from 2015 among the health authorities and currently has the highest rate of illicit drug overdose deaths in BC.

Illicit Drug Overdose Death rate by Health Authority, per 100,000, 2016 *(Source: BC Coroners Service)*

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<th>BC</th>
<th>Island Health</th>
<th>Interior</th>
<th>Northern</th>
<th>Fraser</th>
<th>VCH</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rate</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>14.6</td>
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Illicit Drug Overdose Rate Increases by Health Authority *(Source: BC Coroners Service)*
Supervised consumption services in Vancouver and internationally demonstrate these services are highly effective in reducing the risk of non-fatal and fatal overdoses for service users. Both Insite and the Dr. Peter Centre in Vancouver have reduced the risk of deaths and disease transmission for individuals with histories of addiction and substance use. To date, no overdose deaths have been reported from either of these locations, even with the availability of new, powerful opioids such as Fentanyl.

Integrating supervised consumption into existing harm reduction services in Victoria will help prevent overdose deaths and reduce bloodborne, skin and other infections among those using the service.

Supervised consumption services also provide an access point for individuals to connect with or be referred to other services and supports, including harm reduction supply distribution, education, health care (e.g. wound care), mental health and substance use services and treatment programs. As a result, individuals see improvements in their overall health and wellness. Supervised consumption services do not end with supervised consumption – Island Health will continue to work with partners and community providers to strengthen harm reduction programs and provide supports and links to treatment when individuals are ready to explore these services.

History of Work to Establish Supervised Consumption Services in Victoria

In 2005, Island Health first considered supervised consumption services to prevent overdose deaths and reduce transmission of bloodborne infections. Ultimately, SCS was not pursued at the time because of challenges in obtaining approval under federal legislation. Since 2005, Island Health and community providers have continued to improve and expand harm reduction services, while still recognizing that Victoria – and other communities – would benefit from the integration of supervised consumption services into broader harm reduction programming.

In 2013, a working group in Victoria reviewed evidence on SCS as part of a process to determine the best model of care for individuals living with the most challenging and complex substance use problems in the city. This working group – which included Island Health’s Public Health and Mental Health and Substance Use programs, Victoria Police, AIDS Vancouver Island, Cool Aid and a City Councillor – agreed there was substantial evidence supporting the benefits of SCS, including reducing the risk of transmitting HIV and hepatitis C as well as preventing overdose deaths and engaging marginalized people in the health system. While the working group endorsed SCS, other harm reduction priorities, the-then federal government’s stance against SCS and other factors inhibited ongoing SCS planning.

In 2016, discussions around the need for SCS were renewed following increases in the number of overdoses and overdose deaths largely attributed to the availability of new opiates such as fentanyl and its derivatives. It was this trend that prompted the Provincial Health Officer to declare drug overdoses a public health emergency. The Ministry of Health, in collaboration with the health authorities has developed broad plans to address this emergency, including:

- Measures from law enforcement to prevent the proliferation of illicit drugs
- Improved access to treatment services such as licensing primary care providers to provide opioid substitution therapy and providing broad access to, and training on how to use Naloxone kits
- Targeted harm reduction services aimed at mitigating the risks associated with opiate and opioid use, including supervised consumption services.

As part of Island Health’s response to the public health emergency, the health authority has committed to applying to Health Canada for exemptions to provide SCS in Victoria. The current federal government has voiced its support for SCS as an important harm reduction service, welcoming new applications across Canada. Island Health will continue to plan for supervised consumption services as part of its overall harm reduction strategy.

**The Exemption Application Process**

Island Health is working on applications for exemption under Bill C2: *Respect for Communities Act* to establish supervised consumption services in Victoria. A separate application is required for each location where supervised consumption would be offered. This means that in Victoria’s distributed, multi-site supervised consumption model, several applications will be required. The application is highly detailed, requiring applicants to submit:

- Letters of opinion from key stakeholders including Provincial Ministers, Police Department and Medical Health Officers
- A completed community engagement process, with input from community stakeholders compiled and responses provided by Island Health to questions and concerns submitted during the process
- Evidence supporting supervised consumption in the proposed location(s) including epidemiological data on overdoses, communicable diseases and public safety information from law enforcement
- Full operational plans, including floor plans and operational procedures. Key staff members must be hired, identified and have criminal record checks before an application can be approved.

Island Health plans to submit at least two applications by the end of 2016. Health Canada will review the applications and will approve or deny the submissions, or request additional information. It is not known how long the approval process will take.