



NEWS RELEASE

Alarming rates of disease transmission from drug use in prisons places communities at risk

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VANCOUVER - The alarming incidence of disease transmission among inmates through intravenous drug use is avoidable and a threat to the wider community, a panel of experts said today at a public forum titled Lockdown: Drugs, Prisons and Disease in Our Communities.

As in jurisdictions around the world, drug use is widespread within B.C. correctional facilities and affects health in the wider community regardless of a country's policies on illegal substance use, the experts said.

“Pretending that substance use in prisons doesn't affect our communities is ridiculous and amounts to burying our heads in the sand,” said Gillian Maxwell, chair of Keeping the Door Open: Dialogues on Drug Use that coordinated today's forum at the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue.

“We need to encourage sensible and responsible policies in prisons. People who enter prison disease-free often leave infected with Hepatitis C or HIV. This increases the risk of disease transmission in our communities and is counter to effective public health policy,” added Ms. Maxwell, a former member of the Vancouver Police Board.

Hepatitis C and HIV are very common and serious diseases that spread among the male and female prisoner populations through sharing needles. By introducing needle exchanges and improving prevention, harm reduction and treatment services in federal and provincial prisons, correctional facilities would better serve the inmate populations and the larger community, the experts said.

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Managing and responding to drug use in prisons is challenging and initiatives are underway in some correctional facilities, but much more needs to be done, said Howard Sapers, Canada's Correctional Investigator.

"Estimates from the federal correctional system itself are that 30 per cent of inmates have hepatitis, but I am told by health care officials that it could be as high as 60 per cent. And the rate of HIV infection is 10 times higher in prison than in the community," said Mr. Sapers who acts as an independent ombudsman for the federal corrections system.

"People can leave prison sicker than they when came in and this is not acceptable for inmates or for the health of the wider community," he added.

Research clearly shows that drug use in prisons is a public health issue that affects all of us, said Dr. Thomas Kerr of the B.C. Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS.

"There is growing scientific evidence that extremely high-risk injection drug use is occurring in B.C. prisons," said Dr. Kerr.

"Our findings clearly indicate the need to implement and evaluate harm reduction programs in prison and show that existing HIV treatment programs in correctional facilities need to be expanded."

There are correctional facilities located in each of B.C.'s five regional health authorities.

"If the B.C. Ministry of Health is going to achieve its goals of reducing new infections of HIV and Hepatitis C by 50 per cent then prisons must act immediately," said Ms. Maxwell. "There is overwhelming evidence that spending time in prison increases the likelihood of contracting disease, and the majority of offenders will return to the community."

Keeping the Door Open: Dialogues on Drug Use is a coalition of individuals and organizations representing a diverse range of stakeholder groups, institutional and community-based service providers, health authorities, research centres, charitable foundations, public policy makers, drug consumers, consumer advocates, government and business officials.

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