

Introduction to Harm Reduction Approaches Article

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If you have been following the news lately, you have likely heard that the Conservative government challenged Vancouver's supervised heroin injection site all the way to the Supreme Court, and lost.

This suggests that rather than a "War on Drugs," the most reasonable way to deal with illegal drug use is through a holistic approach which includes prevention, harm reduction, treatment and enforcement.

Prevention does not stop many people from trying drugs, and some people cannot or will not stop using despite consequences. This is where harm reduction plays a role. The main goal of harm reduction is to reduce the adverse health social and economic consequences of the use of drugs.

While most people will associate harm reduction with injection drug use and safe injection sites, there are more common illustrations.

For example, the most commonly used drug in Canada is alcohol. When considering harm reduction approaches, think drinking age, legal driving limits, designated drivers, liquor store density, server training, and safety glassware in bars. These approaches reduce harm associated with poor health, aggressive behaviour, collisions, injuries and death.

Another example of harm reduction with a legal drug is tobacco. Think taxes, bans on advertising, graphics on packaging, minimum age to purchase, nicotine replacement, medications to support quitting, and protection from environmental smoke.

Just as alcohol and tobacco harm reduction stances seek socially constructive ways to reduce harm from risky behaviours and addictions, so too do harm reduction approaches to illegal drug use. Some examples are distribution of glass pipe kits for crack cocaine users, needle and syringe distribution, drug treatment courts, 'wet' shelters, and methadone maintenance treatment, to name a few.

Addiction is an issue in every community, including ours. For those who suffer with addiction, a chronic condition prone to relapse, harm reduction approaches can reduce the risk of overdose, poisoning, burns, mental health problems, dental problems, malnutrition, violence, homelessness, social isolation, and a myriad of other issues. It is a compassionate approach that treats the addict like a real and equal person, and reduces costs to our health, justice, and social services systems.

We all deserve that kind of compassion in our community.

For more information, please visit www.camh.net, or www.ohrdp.ca.