



After the Sydney experiment (see box) a safer injecting centre was set up in Vancouver.



Insite into safer injecting

THE poster says it all. Above a black and white photograph of a shabby, litter-strewn alley are the stunning words 'This should not be an injection site'. Like many cities Vancouver has a problem of addicts injecting in the streets and alleys. Unlike most other cities, however, Vancouver has decided to respond to that problem by providing a place where drug users can inject in safety. Located in an area where drug use is common, "Insite" (injecting site) is housed in a smart looking, green fronted building on one of the main streets in downtown Vancouver. The building is open each day from 10am to 4am and as one of the project workers explained, "even at 3.30am there are people coming in to inject. If we had the resources we could be open 24 hours a day."

Insite has been open for a little over two months and is already attracting around 300 drug users a day. Tracey, one of the project workers, explains: "We can have as many as ten drug users in waiting to use the injecting room at any one time." With freshly decorated walls and wood floors, the building has more of the feel of a modern office than a medical facility. The injecting room itself is brightly lit with

music playing in the background with 12 cubicles around the periphery each facing its own large mirror with overhead lighting. The mirrors give the room the look of a city centre hairdresser although the 'cin bins' in each cubicle tell a different story. The project worker explains that the mirrors enable the staff to see the drug users at all times so "if they are starting to overdose and their lips turn blue, we need to be able to see what is happening and go over to them." The mirrors are also helpful, she explains, in order for the drug users to see that no one is approaching them from behind. On a slightly raised platform at one side of the room facing the booths is a nurse's bay.

"We try to ensure that there are between two to three staff in the room at all times," Tracey explains, "There are times when you spot someone in difficulty in one corner and maybe you have someone else in another part of the room who you are keeping an eye on and something blows up in another booth. You have to keep on top of what is happening at all times.

"Also in trying to keep things calm it helps that we have a few basic rules: no sharing needles, no sharing drugs and no dealing". Most of the Insite clientele are

Neil McKeganey
is Professor of Drug
Misuse Research
at the University
of Glasgow

Neil McKeganey, who believes such sites could benefit the UK, went to see for himself

over-18, but as one of the staff explained: "We can take in people under 18 so long as it is clear that they have been injecting for some time, but we can't take in anyone under 16. If someone under 16 comes in we are required to call the local child care services to have them taken away. We know that there are under 16s in this city who are injecting and I am not sure that we are helping them at all by turning them away. I understand why we have to do it but I don't necessarily agree with the policy".

Once the drug user has injected, they can sit in their cubicle for a while but if there are others waiting to inject they are encouraged to move to the chill out area. Next to the chill out area is the coffee bar and food area. Run by peer educators, the coffee bar is often full of drug users spending time in a warm, friendly environment with free food and hot drinks. This is a medical setting alright, but it is like no medical setting I have visited.

I asked what kind of people they employ in the site and the co-ordinator explained: "They have to be flexible and they mustn't be frightened of being in a room full of drug users and uncapped needles." In a city where around 20 per cent of drug users are thought to be HIV positive and 70 per cent may be infected with Hep C this anxiety is all too easy to understand. The essence here, the co-ordinator explains, is to try to keep the atmosphere calm and relaxed. Recent coverage in the Canadian press has reported that there have already been 25 overdose incidents within the facility. One of the staff explains more modestly: "I don't think all 25 of them would have died but my guess is that five of them probably would have done had we not been able to intervene. Intervention in this case can take the form of

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administering oxygen, narkan or where necessary calling for back up medical support. So far only the oxygen has been needed." Whether it is five or 25 lives that have been saved these figures give an indication of the value of a safe injecting site.

Providing a setting where drug users can inject their drugs safely is a controversial option. Within Vancouver much of the impetus to develop the site arose from the realisation of the public health crisis that was unfolding in relation to drug users health. Overdoses were common and, as one of the staff explained: "We had government-imposed limits on the number of needles that could be given out by needle exchange staff. As a result we were experiencing our own HIV epidemic." Initial opposition from the local business community soon evaporated when it was realised that by setting up the site there would be less, not more, injecting on the streets. At present the area around Insite is pretty run down with drug users very much in evidence standing around on the neighbouring street corners. A few streets away there is one of the main police headquarters and near that an area of the city that has recently been gentrified. As the area around the injecting site is developed, it will be interesting to see if the opposition to Insite reappears. If that happens, the authorities may have a job on their hands protecting this beacon of community health.

When I came away from Insite, I was clear in my own mind that if someone I loved was injecting drugs I would do all I could to try to stop them injecting. But if they were going to inject anyway I would be much happier to know they were doing it in a place like Insite rather than on the streets or in some filthy alley. ■

UPDATE ON THE SYDNEY MEDICALLY SUPERVISED INJECTING CENTRE (MSIC)

Now in its third year, the MSIC trial has been extended to 2007. Dr Ingrid van Beek summaries achievements so far:



- ✓ By end of July 2003 over 5000 clients had been registered
- ✓ Only 41 per cent had been in contact with a drug agency before
- ✓ Core group are long-term homeless heroin users
- ✓ Contact also made with those early on in their drug using careers allowing for early interventions
- ✓ Nearly 110,000 individual injecting episodes have taken place; 74 per cent injecting heroin, four per cent cocaine and the rest a mixture of benzodiazepines and methamphetamine
- ✓ MISC has managed over 700 overdoses and 60 cases of cocaine toxicity without fatality. Medical attention available far quicker than would otherwise have been the case
- ✓ Clients reported a reduction in injecting behaviour since coming to MISC. No new cases of HIV reported in the King's Cross area since MISC set up with Hep B and C incidence stabilised – unlike other areas where it has risen
- ✓ Over 2000 clients referred on to other agencies
- ✓ During evaluation period local resident support increased from 68 to 78 per cent and from 58 to 63 per cent among businesses
- ✓ No evidence of increased dealing, using or drug-related crime in the area.

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