

## **A few more dead junkies, who cares?**

I briefly hesitated before writing this opinion piece after the ignorant, vile, and racist comments directed toward my family and me by a few vocal people who are opposed to Richmond Council exploring a humane approach to deal with the lethality of addiction; principally, exploring the idea of a Supervised Consumption Site as part of a continuum of care. The hesitation lasted only a few moments after I listened to some of our political leaders make irresponsible and ill-informed statements related to B.C.'s decriminalization pilot project. Their statements resemble the rhetoric spewed by some of our neighbours to the south, where the politics of division play out daily.

From my decades in law enforcement and years in government, I know that having an honest discussion about drug policy remains extremely difficult and has innate hazards: heated debate, disagreement, bitterness and, at times, hysteria. Stakeholders, subject to their different world views, ideologies and frames of reference, challenge other stakeholders. Pure reason competes with politics in shaping the response of the government.

This is not a problem that developed overnight, and it will not be solved overnight: The war on drugs is at least 50 years old, as we all know.

Politicians find it hard to liberalize their approach to drugs: Any politician who advocates for more liberal drug laws or approaches risks being portrayed as favouring drug use. Many are reluctant to openly discuss the issue, and several are concerned about the prospect of losing their voting base, regardless of the oath they have taken.

As we further politicize the debate because of the upcoming election in B.C. and the prospect of a federal election next year, many politicians and critics emphasize enforcement to win the war against drug use. Further, they contend that failure can be attributed to the inability of various actors in the criminal justice process over the past five decades.

Progressives, on the other hand, suggest that substance use should be dealt with by increasing services to those who are addicted because it is primarily a health issue. They see the criminal justice system, at root, being irrelevant because it deals only with the symptoms of underlying social problems — so the solution to drug addiction must be found in broad-scale social change.

Interestingly, there is an increasing consensus among members of law enforcement that drug dependency is primarily a health issue rather than a legal issue. Previously in Vancouver, police officers were afforded a wide margin of discretion on whether to arrest people with addiction problems when found in possession of small quantities of drugs for personal use. Known as defacto decriminalization, it was in existence for over three decades in Vancouver: Police had the authority to direct users to where they could

— or could not — consume their drugs. This was a key concept when I worked with then Mayor Owen and Mr. MacPherson to open North America's first supervised Injection site in Vancouver.

Drug use is one of the nation's most difficult and complex problems, but we must refuse to accept the notion that somehow it is beyond our reach to solve. Unfortunately, the inability of "the system" to respond to immediate needs creates a huge credibility problem for any drug strategy.

Asking an addict to be patient when in crisis and to wait for an available slot for detoxification and treatment is, frankly, a waste of time. The opportunity to intervene is lost and the addicted person will view "the system" as useless and ineffective. Repeated experiences of this sort simply reinforce the idea that he or she cannot initiate change. And the cycle repeats.

Developing strategies to deal with the "open air" use of drugs is a central theme of all plans to revitalize areas suffering from urban decay. We know the drug industry is simple and profitable. Its simplicity makes it relatively easy to organize; its profitability makes it hard to stop. The enormous gap between the cost of producing the drugs and the price paid by the final consumer goes a long way in explaining why some drug policies fail. Cutting off the supply at times is hopeless. The drug business is simply too profitable and the people making vast profits from managing the criminal enterprises distance themselves from the activities on the street.

Enforcement is, at best, able to displace the market and to keep a lid on it. The police's priority is to stop the threats to public order and safety that drug use can bring. Enforcement everywhere ought to affect the supply and use of drugs. However, the increased efforts the police have made to stem the flow do not appear to have discouraged the purchase or use of drugs.

In addition to their impact on health, drugs cause other kinds of harm, not only to the individual but to society at large. Drug users disproportionately commit crimes. Given the expense of a heavy habit, crime is an obvious income source. Where drug use directly harms society, the police are right to intervene. However, the best way to protect society is not necessarily to increase enforcement. If that were the right course of action, the police would begin by pursuing alcohol users, who engage in far more aggression and misbehaviour than users of other substance, licit or illicit.

There needs to be a willingness among all levels of government to rally together to develop and implement a coordinated, comprehensive framework for action that will help address the drug problem in BC. Critical to its success will be the balance between public health and social order. This approach must highlight what is required from all relevant stakeholders, which includes the very people who have the problem. It must

create a framework for action to appropriately and effectively deal with substance misuse and associated crime.

It must clarify that one needs to deal with people who have an addiction and need a continuum of care, while clearly stating that social order and health problems related to “open air” drug use must be stopped.

We cannot arrest our way out of our drug problem. The best way to address this problem is to be proactive and educate young people before they start. For those that are addicted to drugs, we must try to help them stop through intervention and treatment, and if we cannot help them stop, we must try to reduce the harm their addiction is going to bring to them and consequently to society. This means accepting and respecting the fact that addicts are people too.

They are not a lost group, they have an identity, they have stories, and they can lead useful lives. They are not just a few more dead junkies.

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