

Nurses and Nurse Practitioners of British Columbia (NNPBC) and the Harm Reduction Nurses Association (HRNA) call for the decriminalization of people who use drugs in B.C.

August 8, 2019

Canada is in the midst of a public health emergency with more than 11,500 overdose deaths between January 2016 and December 2018, 4460 in 2018 alone¹. British Columbia, which declared a public health emergency in April 2016, continues to be the most impacted province with 1,486 lives lost in 2017, 1510 in 2018, and 268 so far in 2019 (January-March 2019)². As a response to this overdose crisis, harm reduction interventions such as the distribution of take-home naloxone kits, the implementation of overdose prevention sites, supervised consumption sites, funding for local Community Action Teams and access to opioid agonist therapy were scaled-up in BC. Recently, a study revealed that an estimated 3,030 (2,900-3,240) deaths were averted by these interventions combined³. However, as this study points out, the absolute numbers of overdose deaths have not changed despite these interventions. This supports the need to look for interventions that address the root causes of this overdose crisis: an unregulated and unsafe drug supply and the criminalization of people who use drugs.

On April 24 2019, BC's provincial officer of health Dr. Bonnie Henry released a 50-page report⁴ calling for the

immediate decriminalization of people who use drugs in B.C. In this report, Dr. Henry outlines approaches that could be implemented in B.C. to stop arrests and incarceration of people who use drugs. As she points out, these punitive approaches are ineffective and have the opposite effect: instead of discouraging drug use and protecting people from harm associated with drug use, they actually put people at the risk of getting ill and dying, increase harms, create barriers to health care and social services, fuel stigma, and cause long-lasting barriers to employment and housing. Dr. Henry's call for decriminalization echoes similar calls from top health officials in other Canadian jurisdictions such as Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. It is also consistent with resolutions passed by members of the NDP and the Liberal Party last year – and a private member bill (Bill C-460) tabled in the final days of the House of Commons⁵. Yet, upon its release, her report was immediately rejected by B.C. minister of public safety and solicitor general Mike Farnworth.

Today, the Nurses and Nurse Practitioners of British Columbia (NNPBC) and the Harm Reduction Nurses

Association (HRNA) come together to call on the B.C. government to take immediate steps to move toward the decriminalization of people who use drugs. As nurses who work in B.C. and provide frontline care in the midst of this public health emergency, we see firsthand the impact of criminalization on our clients, on their families, on our practice and our communities. As nurses, we see decriminalization as an essential step to remove barriers to care and support, reduce stigma and discrimination, improve health and socioeconomic outcomes, and work toward a more just and compassionate society. As such, we strongly encourage the B.C. government to develop a new model that focuses on linkages to health care and social services. This model should use already existing opportunities within Provincial Policing Regulation to redirect police resources away from the criminal enforcement of simple drug possession, and toward community-based and evidence-based health and social programs. We do not support the use of administrative penalties as a replacement to criminal charges. Administrative fees will add to harms and continue criminalization and do little to no good in reducing harms described above.

As nurses, we support the immediate decriminalization of people who use drugs in B.C. This is a critical way forward to address the overdose crisis and to promote greater health, wellbeing, justice, and equity at an individual and population level. Additional steps include ensuring access to a safer supply of substances, housing, mental health services, treatment, support, and harm reduction services.

The Nurses and Nurse Practitioners of British Columbia (NNPBC) is a professional association that represents registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, nurse practitioners, and registered psychiatric nurses in B.C. The Harm Reduction Nurses Association (HRNA) is a Canadian national organization with a mission to advance harm reduction nursing through practice, education, research, and advocacy. It represents registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, nurse practitioners, and registered psychiatric nurses who provide harm reduction care to people who drugs.

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1 <https://health-infobase.canada.ca/datalab/national-surveillance-opioid-mortality.html>

2 <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/statistical/illicit-drug.pdf>

3 <https://www.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/add.14664>

4 <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/health/about-bc-s-health-care-system/office-of-the-provincial-health-officer/reports-publications/special-reports/stopping-the-harm-report.pdf>

5 https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/decriminalization-drugs-canada_ca_5d0f8751e4b0aa375f4e1b8c