

## **Time for a supervised injection facility in Quebec?**

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How would you react if patients with hypertension were denied care at the emergency department, were blamed for their illness, and the services needed were located far from home? This is unfortunately the situation that are facing people with addictions.

Injection drug users (IDU) are a particularly vulnerable population. Through injecting, people are exposed to HIV and HCV. They are also more prone to suffer from infective endocarditis, abscesses, sometimes fatal overdoses, and mental health comorbidities. IDU are stigmatised and significantly marginalized by society. Injection drug use also has consequences for the population in general, with a feeling of insecurity and criminality surrounding this illegal practice.

Several options already exist in Quebec to help IDUs. Community organizations, although under-funded, are dedicated to treating addicts. Sites where patients can receive opioid substitution therapy (OST) or detox services can also help IDU decrease or stop their use of drugs. Needle exchange programs in healthcare settings, pharmacies, and community organizations provide sterile needles that reduce the risk of infection. Nevertheless, in 2004 the WHO declared that while such programs are necessary, they were not sufficient to reduce the burden of HIV and HCV among IDU. Supervised injection facilities (SIF) could be a solution to this problem.

Although SIF can be flexible in their set-up to suit local environments, they generally consist of three parts. First, the user is welcomed and provided with sterile injecting equipment. The user then sits down at an individual injection station where injection can occur under supervision (usually by a nurse) who can provide advice on how to inject more safely and monitor for overdose. After injection, the user can feel the high in a safe area while also accessing multiple resources such as housing, food, detox, and rehabilitation services.

The first SIF was established in Bern, Switzerland, 30 years ago. However, it was not until the 2000s that SIF were introduced in Canada. Today, the only city in

the Americas with a SIF is Vancouver. Several other Canadian cities are trying to establish SIF. In Quebec, Montreal and Quebec City have already conducted studies which confirmed the need and feasibility of SIF. Montreal has determined how an SIF would operate and Quebec City is currently working on this. Currently, SIF advocates are waiting for an exemption to the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act from the federal government to permit operation. The Dr. Peter Centre in Vancouver received such an exemption in January this year, suggesting a positive outcome may be in store for other provincial jurisdictions in Canada. Hopefully the Trudeau government will agree to the exemption soon!