



## SIS: Keep the conversation going

AS ONTARIO LOOKS AHEAD TO greater access to supervised injection services (SIS), I want to talk about one of the most important things we must remember as we wade through these new waters. People who struggle with addiction and substance use are people, like you and me. Addiction is not a choice. And their individual stories of struggle are as unique as the individuals themselves.

RNAO and its members must remember this as we work with our partners in health care to establish SIS across Ontario. Let's also keep three vital things in mind as we move ahead: never cut ties with individuals who struggle with addiction; never judge; and never shut people out or reject them on the basis of unfounded bias. Instead, let's open our hearts, initiate dialogue, and offer support.

Most of us would agree that accessing care for addiction or substance use should not be more difficult than accessing care for cancer, diabetes, COPD or any other health issue. Patients and clients with physical illnesses receive expert and compassionate care from nurses in all sectors and settings. The same ought to be true for anyone who needs help.

RNAO has enlisted experts in the field of mental health and addiction (since these challenges often go hand-in-hand) to help us build on this notion of equal access. We look to RNs like Lynn Anne Mulrooney, an RNAO senior policy analyst,

and Sabrina Merali, one of our talented program managers in the IABPG Centre, who have led initiatives at RNAO that have helped to lift the lid on myths associated with mental health and substance use.

I am particularly proud of our Mental Health and Addiction Initiative, and its one-of-a-kind Youth Mental Health and Addiction Champions project that connects youth with school

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counsellors and public health RNs and NPs. Together they build a network of champions who help with mental health promotion, stigma reduction, and substance misuse prevention in high schools. This project has inspired me in its capacity to create an intersectoral sense of community to tackle the difficult challenges our youth face.

RNAO has also advanced and enhanced knowledge on mental health and addictions through its best practice guidelines (BPG). Our *Engaging Clients Who Use Substances* BPG offers evidence-based recommendations for assessing and providing interventions to individuals who may be at risk for or experiencing a substance use disorder. *Supporting Clients on Methadone Maintenance*

*Treatment* (MMT) is another BPG that provides nurses with the best evidence for supporting clients who are either a potential candidate for, or are already on, MMT for opioid dependence.

It was extremely fulfilling this spring to receive a formal letter from David McKeown, Toronto's former medical officer of health, asking RNAO to develop a BPG on SIS

following the city's approval of the services at three sites. He, like RNAO, is a steadfast champion for SIS. In fact, he brought the proposal for these important services to Toronto's board of health. I am thrilled that he has accepted our invitation to serve as a panel co-chair for this important BPG.

The panel of experts for the guideline will also include Cori Chapman, the mother of Leigh (featured on page 12) and Brad Chapman, whose preventable death last year from overdose helped to shine a light on the pressing need for services in this city. People like Cori, who have lived experience and have lost loved ones to addiction, will be central to the development of the SIS BPG. Their important experiences will inform our recommendations and help us

to remember that addiction is an illness that can affect any one of us at any time.

Some opponents of harm reduction practices, such as SIS, say they don't want these services in their own backyards. Perhaps they want to ignore the fact that addiction and substance use is already in our own backyards. RNAO's own Nancy Campbell, director of finance, took a photo this spring of a syringe at St. James Park and asked her followers on Twitter if they would rather see syringes in the park or at supervised injection sites. RNAO member Amanda Dodge tweeted "We are fully behind you" when she heard I was preparing for a presentation to Toronto's Board of Health on behalf of RNAO. These individual tweets, and this open dialogue about addiction and substance use is making a difference.

I urge all nurses – RNs, NPs and RPNs – nursing students, and the public at large to keep the conversation going. In a small way, this ongoing dialogue will keep the many lives lost to addiction in our hearts and minds. It will help us push the harm reduction agenda faster, and will provide comfort to families that those lives were not lost in vain. **RN**

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