



## Saving lives: Expanding harm reduction to include supervised injection services

HOW WOULD YOU FEEL IF A LOVED one or colleague died of a drug overdose and, as a nurse, you knew they could have been helped? This is a reality for so many. You may have read in the *Toronto Star* earlier this year about Leigh Chapman, an RNAO member who lost her brother this way. Brad Chapman was homeless for 20 years and addicted to cocaine, opioids and amphetamines when he collapsed in a Toronto alleyway in August 2015. His death a few days later in hospital was another tragic story of a member of the city’s homeless population needlessly dying.

Drug addiction touches me deeply because I have seen the devastation it can cause to people we love dearly, and to their families. These are all good people, like you and me. People whose circumstances in life might just be different, and who face challenges many of us have not faced. People who deserve our respect and love.

This is why I was honoured when a group of prominent Canadian leaders (in government, academia, business and the non-profit sector) asked me to add my name to a select list of supporters who would give a public face to the urgent need to expand harm reduction services in Toronto. On March 14, I was thrilled to get behind the announcement that three Toronto health organizations would be adding safe injection services (SIS) to their existing health services in order to

tackle the city’s rising number of fatal overdoses.

Between 2004 and 2013, the number of people who died from overdose in Toronto went from 146 to 206. That’s an increase of 41 per cent. In 2014, that number jumped to 252, a further increase of more than 20 per cent. Offering expanded harm reduction services to this

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vulnerable population has shown to reduce mortality, and to also limit the transmission of diseases such as HIV and hepatitis C. It also helps to connect drug users with social services and supports. And, it serves to build safer and more caring communities.

Given RNAO is a provincial association; it would be unfair to write only about Toronto. But winning SIS in Toronto is the door that will open services across the province, and the country.

This is not the first time RNAO has spoken about harm reduction, including SIS. This is also not the first time nurses have spoken out about the impact these services have on vulnerable communities. In

fact, nurses were behind the launch of Vancouver’s Insite locations – where RNs supervise injections – and RNAO was the catalyst for a coalition of nursing organizations that fought and won when former Prime Minister Stephen Harper attempted to shut Insite down in 2011.

Nurses across our country

have a unique opportunity to join forces and support SIS that saves lives. We cannot sit by as more lives are senselessly lost to addiction. In the name of Brad Chapman and so many others like him, and to honour the Chapman family for sharing their devastating story of loss, we must do all we can to ensure these services are available in a timely, accessible and person-centred manner. Harm reduction, including SIS, is an essential tool in a comprehensive health strategy for substance use and addiction. It helps vulnerable people access vital services, including overdose prevention and management, first aid, HIV testing, acute and chronic wound care, immunizations,

reproductive health care, health education, counseling, and referrals to detox.

RNAO is calling for all nurses across Canada – RNs, NPs, RPNs and nursing students – to advocate openly, courageously and knowledgeably for SIS. When I visited Toronto’s Board of Health in March to speak about RNAO’s support of the city’s expansion of these services, I came ready to explain how SIS is a pragmatic and evidence-based policy that will improve health outcomes, prevent needless deaths, and contribute to safer communities. I was ready to provide the alarming statistics noted above. But as I waited my turn to speak, I listened to a mother valiantly share her story of losing her daughter to addiction. I was so moved by her honesty that, when my turn came, I felt compelled to simply note that so many of those who die from an overdose are as invisible, forgotten, and marginalized in death as they have been in life. After hearing her story of loss, I humbly added that we have the evidence here in front of us. Now it’s time to act and save lives.

Today, I urge each and all of you to [stand up and speak out](#) in support of supervised injection services. **RN**

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