

Since the dietary goals were instituted in 1977, overall fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol consumption by North Americans has decreased while carbohydrate ingestion has increased to proportions resembling those recommended by the advisory institutions.³ In spite of mean caloric intake falling to within the recommended range and a slight increase in average physical activity, incidences of the metabolic syndrome and diabetes mellitus continue to rise. Public compliance with the prescribed caloric intake and increased average physical activity suggests that policy may be contributing to the etiology of this epidemic.³ As evidence-based medical practitioners, the lack of data to support the current dietary recommendations should be alarming. Current evidence supports recommending reductions in dietary intake of carbohydrates (refined sugars, starches, foods with high glycemic index) with concomitant increases in fat intake to replace lost calories for patients with metabolic syndrome and diabetes. Further research is necessary to determine optimal levels of carbohydrate restriction, but restriction prescription for our patients should start now. 

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Insite: A Harm Reduction Success Story

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In a landmark ruling that received international attention, the Supreme Court of Canada unanimously ruled in favor of Insite, Vancouver's safe injection facility, ensuring that its vulnerable users will continue to benefit well into the future from the harm reduction services it provides. This ruling comes at a time when the effectiveness of the international campaign against the illegal drug trade is being questioned and governments begin to seek new strategies to try and successfully control what has been dubbed the "War on Drugs". Although harm reduction strategies such as Insite will not end the illegal drug battle, they remain essential to the health outcomes of their users. As we begin the search for a new strategy to control the increasing illegal drug epidemic, we must realize that the inclusion of harm reduction will be integral to its success.

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It was in June 17, 1971 that U.S. President Richard Nixon initiated the "War on Drugs". Nixon's goal was to use prohibition, incarceration, and military intervention to define and reduce the illegal drug trade.¹ As we enter the 40th year of this campaign, there is increasing reason to believe that this strategy has all but failed. Since 1981, drug control budgets around the world have increased exponentially.² In Canada it is estimated that over \$2.3 billion is spent annually on enforcing drug laws.³ While increased spending has resulted in the highest levels of drug related incarceration rates ever seen⁴, this prohibitionist stance, which focuses on law enforcement, has yet to translate into decreased drug use or availability. Meanwhile, the average cost of marijuana, cocaine, and heroin has decreased, and their purity levels have significantly increased. Effectively, these circumstances facilitate acquisition of illicit drugs while enhanced purity increases drug potency and thus risk of overdose.⁵⁻⁷

In Vancouver we are exposed to the harsh realities of a powerful drug trade: gang wars have ravaged this city for decades. Shootings are a regular occurrence and innocent bystanders all too often become innocent victims.⁸ As police presence increases to combat these issues, drug users are forced into the alleyways and low-income housing units, away from both public view and access to harm reduction opportunities. Although law enforcement remains integral to the fight against the illegal drug trade, past trends have shown that it will not succeed on its own. Until alternative strategies, such as harm reduction, are used effectively with law enforcement, the drug trade and the associated health risks of illegal drug use in Vancouver and around the world will continue to flourish.

Insite provides a safe and health-focused environment for injection drug users with the goal of harm reduction, a strategy that uses policies and messages that seek to reduce harm without eliminating the harmful behaviours themselves. At Insite, users are provided with sterile equipment and medical staff are present to provide addiction treatment, mental health assistance, and first aid in the event of an overdose. These inherent services provided by Insite actively save lives. In 2010 Insite recorded over 300,000 unique visits by its users with over 500 supervised injections occurring daily. Of the 221 overdoses that occurred that year, there were no fatalities due to the presence of the trained medical staff.⁹

Since opening in 2006, Insite's harm reduction strategies have benefited not only its users, but also the area surrounding the facility, in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Insite has resulted in reductions in public disorder, reductions in syringe sharing, reductions in violence against women, increased condom use, increased use of detox programs and addiction treatment, the successful management of over 1000 overdoses, and a 35% decrease in overdose related fatalities.¹⁰⁻¹⁶ Furthermore, Insite's presence has seen no adverse changes in community drug use patterns, no increase in initiation into injection drug use, and no increase in drug-related crime.¹⁷⁻¹⁹

It is based on these findings that the Supreme Court of Canada ruled in favor of Insite: seeing the benefits of its health services outweighing the risks of absolute prohibition of illegal drugs on its premises.²⁰ In a world that has lived through the failed "War on Drugs", harm reduction is finally receiving the acceptance that it deserves. As we move forward in our fight to curtail the current illegal drug epidemic in Vancouver and around the world, we have to realize that harm reduction is a vital component to the success of this campaign. 

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