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Ruling offers dose of hope to more than just Insite

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Page: S3

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While Insite, Vancouver's internationally recognized supervised- injection site, continues its struggle to remain open, Vancouver's Dr. Peter Centre has been providing supervised-injection service in relative calm. The centre was heartened that the recent B.C. Supreme Court decision about Insite noted the "incontrovertible conclusion" that "the risk of morbidity and mortality [death and disease] associated with addiction and injection can be ameliorated by injection in the presence of qualified health professionals." This is the crux of the Dr. Peter Centre's 2002 decision to begin providing the service.

The Dr. Peter Centre provides health-care services to individuals with HIV/ AIDS and related, complex health-care problems, particularly mental illness and addiction. The centre's health-care services range from nursing care to nutritious meals, counselling and art and music therapy. Counselling about reducing harm from drug use and referrals to detox and other treatment are routine.

The Dr. Peter Centre's supervised-injection service is one small part of its primary health care. The galvanizing impetus was two overdoses - one in a client bathroom, the other in a laundry room - fortunately, neither fatal. Aware that there had never been a death in a supervised injection site anywhere in the world, we investigated this option.

The decision to provide the service was made after a consultation with the College of Registered Nurses of British Columbia, the entity authorized and required by B.C.'s Health Professions Act to establish practice standards for registered nurses. Furthermore, the college's practice standards state that the employer is responsible for ensuring a work environment that supports nurses in meeting those standards.

The college confirmed it was within the scope of registered nursing practice to provide clients with evidence-based information so they can give themselves intravenous injections more safely. It noted that teaching and promoting such self-care prevents illness and promotes health, especially for clients with high-risk behaviour. Such observation also fosters the therapeutic relationship, a key factor for engagement in rehabilitation. The College of Registered Psychiatric Nurses has also confirmed this practice.

In the centre's day program, nurses directly observe injections in a purpose-built room; in our licensed 24-hour care residence, nurses provide this service in residents' private rooms.

When the centre began the service, it did not request an exemption under Section 56 of the federal Controlled Drugs and Substances Act because it is undertaking a necessary health service that provincial law compels us to provide. The nurses do everything reasonably possible to observe federal law - they do not touch, inject or provide the drugs.

On the one hand, as an employer, we are obliged through B.C. law to ensure nurses can meet their practice standard, while on the other hand, federal authorities could take the perspective that, while nurses at no time are in possession of drugs, they are contravening the act.

Thankfully, the B.C. Supreme Court declared that, for Insite clients, sections of the act related to possession and trafficking violate their rights under Section 7 of the Charter. We believe the same applies to Dr. Peter Centre clients, many of whom also use Insite. Indeed, the ruling has relevance for citizens in similar circumstances throughout the county. It may yet be that the Dr. Peter Centre model of supervised-injection service has something to offer as a way forward for all.