

Dr. Peter Centre treats Vancouver's sickest, most needy

By Mary Frances Hill December 1, 2008



Stephen Koughan, a 56-year-old patient at the Dr. Peter Centre, is coming to the end of his 13-month treatment.

Photograph by : Stuart Davis

VANCOUVER — If it takes a certain kind of grace for a sick person to recognize that many others are worse off, Stephen Koughan has it.

A year ago, Koughan, who has AIDS, was barely coping. Six feet tall and not quite 130 pounds, he was undernourished, and hadn't been taking the drugs so vital to treating his disease.

He was living in the Downtown Eastside, and he was addicted to drugs.

Three years before, a stroke had partially immobilized his left side.

"I wasn't taking medication regularly, my weight was down, but I was reaching out for something better,"

Koughan said Sunday from his suite in the Dr. Peter Centre, the West End residence that treats people suffering from AIDS.

Now, after a year of 24-hour care at the centre, he's ready to move on.

"My blood work is all good — and I'm waiting for the next stage. Then someone with bigger problems can take my place," he said.

Ideally, the next stage for a person like Koughan, who still can't move his left side, and suffers short-term memory loss and confusion, would be assisted housing, with access to 24-hour care for their health needs, according to Dr. Peter Centre executive director Maxine Davis.

But Koughan is one of six patients at Dr. Peter Centre who find themselves immobilized: They're ready to leave, but the city's lack of supportive housing makes that impossible.

Meanwhile, the Dr. Peter Foundation estimates there are about 2,000 people in Metro Vancouver who are dealing with the effects of HIV, but don't have access to drug treatment and the health care they need.

The bottleneck has forced the Dr. Peter Centre, which houses clients in 24 suites at its Comox Street location, to turn away some of the city's sickest and most needy. It hasn't had a vacancy in six months.

"It would be unconscionable to say [to patients in improved health], 'out you go,' and lose that investment that brought them back to health," said Davis.

Rather than moving patients out of the centre, the Dr. Peter Foundation has turned its focus toward those still waiting for treatment.

The foundation has established a joint venture partnership with the Vancouver Native Health Society and Vancouver Native Housing Society, and proposed a new 24-hour care residence in the Downtown Eastside.

The proposal would include 30 suites of supportive housing and a new clinic for the Vancouver Native Health Society, which treats about 1,500 people suffering from AIDS.

The most common treatment for HIV, the virus known to cause AIDS, is HAART, or Highly Active Anti-Retroviral Therapy. HAART can extend life to 20 or 25 years after diagnosis, where a person suffering the effects of AIDS without treatment may live up to a decade, said Davis.

"Here we are in a modern city — we're not talking about Africa here — and people are not being given the opportunity to have a longer life."

Davis said early reaction from government funders is positive. The city's housing office may recommend to council that the city provide leased land for the project for \$1 a year. BC Housing has shown interest in funding the building's construction phase.

But obstacles remain.

The operating costs of a new residence could amount to about \$2.5 million a year — funds that Vancouver Coastal Health can't commit to, according to Davis.

"We know the provincial government respects the work of all three organizations. But we need to bridge the gap between, 'We like your work' and 'We'll fund your work.'"

mfhill@vancouver.sun.com



Stephen Koughan, a 56-year-old patient at the Dr. Peter Centre, is coming to the end of his 13-month treatment.

Photograph by : Stuart Davis