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### Has “harm reduction” gone too far?

I grew up in an age when personal responsibility was the accepted norm; a time when people had to suffer and live with the direct consequences of their actions. It sure sped up the learning process and, in my estimation, instilled a deep sense of personal accountability that is sadly lacking in today’s society.

Today, it feels as though it’s unacceptable to even talk about consequences, never mind actually try to impose them through the law. There’s always an excuse now for why people do “bad” things, either to themselves or to others, and there is a plethora of activist groups that advocate on behalf of “marginalized” groups, demanding taxpayer funded services and programs to reduce the harm people experience from their own decisions.

The current “harm reduction” approach to drug use is a case in point. On the surface and in its original form, this strategy seems to make sense: provide sterile drug paraphernalia to drug users to reduce the spread of communicable diseases and reduce the health care costs associated with the treatment of these diseases. The cost effectiveness of adopting this policy at the national and provincial levels was front and center in the arguments to government and citizens prior to its adoption.

Since its initial implementation, however, “harm reduction” has been expanded to include housing (both shelters and longer term supported housing), food programs, and, more recently, safe injection sites. In other words, providing full supports to individuals with drug addictions, up to and including helping them to inject their drugs, with no questions asked, as there is no requirement to participate in any programs to access any of these taxpayer funded services.

Activists constantly claim that this strategy is “evidenced based” and “successful.” The problem is, our lived experience (more addicts on the streets and shooting up in public spaces, discarded needles, more property crime) begs the question of what success looks like. The fact that every community is seeing more demands for homeless shelters, 24/7 supportive transition housing, harm reduction supplies, and, now, overdose prevention sites and safe injection sites, begs the question of whether we are simply enabling people to remain in their addictions rather than allowing them to reach a point in their lives where their experience with the consequences of their addiction makes them want to get help to change their lives.

Unfortunately, the proponents of a full services, no-questions-asked approach to harm reduction for drug users consistently fail to take into account that the way many of their “clients” access their illegal drug of choice is by stealing from other people – most often the people who are paying for all the services being provided to them at taxpayer expense.

Most local governments are now scrambling to devise strategies to deal with the consequences of the national and provincial governments’ harm reduction policies and programs. We’re all struggling to address the public health and safety issues associated with discarded needles, increased property crime, more vagrancy and panhandling, and more public incidences of illicit drug use. All too often, the outcomes of the current harm reduction approach to illicit drug use directly undermines our investments in new infrastructure and amenities and our efforts to create safe, resilient, and sustainable communities.

I’ve spoken to a number of Mayor’s over the past month and we’re all feeling similar frustrations: the current approach to harm reduction for illicit drug users has simply marginalized the majority of our citizens and passed the harm of drug addiction on to them in the form of unsafe streets and increased property crime.

Something needs to change, and soon.

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