

“Marijuana is harmful and will remain illegal”: Ottawa

The federal government has proposed a 5-year strategy to combat illicit drug use, but critics say the framework sits on a flimsy financial foundation.

The \$245-million strategy is based in part on lighter penalties for possessing small amounts of marijuana and on increased public education about risks associated with use of the drug. “These legislative reforms will ensure that our possession laws can be enforced more effectively while at the same time [we] toughen penalties against cannabis grow operations,” Justice Minister Martin

Cauchon said May 27. “Our message to Canadians and especially our young people is clear — marijuana is harmful and it will remain illegal.”

CMA President Dana Hanson says the government is providing less than half of the money it promised to support the plan. “We are very concerned that the strategy lacks the funding to have a meaningful impact,” he said.

Cauchon said the bill recognizes that “most Canadians feel it is inappropriate” that a person with a small amount of marijuana faces a criminal conviction.

The bill proposes a scale of fines for people who have less than 15 g of marijuana or between 15 g and 30 g. Those with more than 30 g still face prosecution and possible prison terms.

Addiction experts are taking a wait-and-see attitude. “It’s too soon to tell ... whether this strategy is enough,” said Dr. David Marsh, president of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto. “We look forward to having those leading the strategy report every 2 years to see how well this program is working.” — *Steve Wharry, CMAJ*

Time for a new approach to heroin addiction, Vancouver says

When North America’s first purpose-built, supervised site for using heroin opened in Vancouver in early February, all that was missing were the addicts.

InSite, near Hastings and Main streets at the gritty centre of the city’s Downtown East Side, offers 6 stalls for self-administered injections. Clean needles, spoons, sterile water and lighters are laid on steel counters. A raised nursing station oversees the stalls. The bright utilitarian look is softened by potted palms and, on opening day, thousands of tulips in memory of drug users who shot up in nearby alleys and then died of overdose or disease.

But with addicts forced to mill about outside the site because of legal barriers against drug use, the “opening” was actually a media event — part of the lobbying by health and community groups to hasten federal approval of new and radical approaches to illegal drug use.

Proposed initiatives are based on a new-to-Canada premise of harm reduction rather than law enforcement. Included are proposals for clinical trials in 3 cities to introduce heroin-assisted treatment for addicts, and for heroin consumption facilities for Vancouver.

Approval for these has been voiced in principle, says Liberal MP Paddy Torsney, who chaired the 18-month investigation by the all-party Special Committee on Non-Medical Use of Drugs. Its 39 recommendations were released Dec. 9.

“Current policies are not serving us

well,” Torsney told *CMAJ*. “We have to talk about [illegal drugs] as a health issue and not a moral issue.”

The committee’s most daring recommendations fall under its call for “removal of federal regulatory or legislative barriers” to testing innovative methods of treatment. The committee called for consumption sites and for a pilot project in Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal to “test the effectiveness of heroin-assisted treatment for drug-dependent individuals resistant to other forms of treatment.”

Dr. Martin Schechter, professor of epidemiology at the University of British Columbia, submitted a proposal to Health Canada in February for the clinical heroin trials. He said they would attempt to determine whether hard-core users who have unsuccessfully tried methadone treatment at least twice can be treated using medically prescribed heroin.

Recovery would be achieved by breaking the addicts’ “cycle of crime and other things they usually have to do to pay for their illicit drugs. It would also put them in contact with the health care system.”

Schechter said there are about 90 000 heroin addicts in Canada, and 20% to 30% of them would be candidates for the trials. During the trials, which would be sponsored by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, physicians would administer diamorphine.

It’s no surprise that support for the trials and consumption sites is being led by Vancouver, which is plagued not only by problems of drug use and dis-



A national problem: shooting up in Nova Scotia

ease but also by a crime wave attributed largely to addicts.

Last November, former coroner Larry Campbell became mayor after promising to tackle drugs as a health rather than an enforcement issue, and to open consumption sites. In April, a Vancouver group opened a temporary, but illegal, supervised injection site.

Other examples of the sea change in opinion are found among people such as Crown Prosecutor Rob Rattan, a spokesperson for From Grief to Action, a group of middle-class parents whose children became heroin addicts. The group contributed to the InSite facility.

Consumption facilities “can help protect heroin addicts from an overdose and disease,” said Rattan at the opening of InSite. His son Gavin, now 21 and off heroin, had once overdosed in a nearby alley. — *Deborah Jones, Vancouver*