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Scientists have a duty to challenge government policies, top researcher says

Scientists have an obligation to speak out when political leaders “systematically ignore scientific evidence,” says a leading researcher with the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS in Vancouver.

The principal role of science is to advance human understanding and scientists cannot be “excused from doing the right thing” because of fear of a threat to their credibility, Dr. Thomas Kerr told the annual conference of the Ontario HIV/AIDS Treatment Network in Toronto on Nov. 17.

Kerr, director of the BC Centre’s Urban Health Research Initiative, said his centre’s research into the downtown Vancouver Insite supervised safe-injection site for drug users comes under attack regularly.

Some politicians and media commentators take issue with scientific evidence about the benefits of harm reduction programs, such as needle exchanges for injection drug users, in reducing rates of transmissible diseases such as HIV and hepatitis C, he said in an interview after his address at the conference.

“We still have commentators who say needle exchanges don’t work, which is just shocking,” he said.

Kerr advised researchers to delay speaking publicly about policy-relevant research findings until their research has been peer reviewed. For example, researchers at the BC centre have agreed not to speak out about findings related to Insite until the research “has passed the test of independent peer review,” Kerr said. “We use the system of independent peer review as a form of protection.”

However, scientists can and should advocate for better integration of science and policy development, he said, adding that at his centre, researchers “regularly respond when we think science is being misrepresented.”

“As academics, we have some choices,” he said. “We can pursue research of intellectual interest, but when a question presents itself that has policy relevance, we have an obligation to take it on.”

Response might take the form of writing letters to media outlets or working with community-based, legal and human rights organizations, he said.

For example, when the federal government repeatedly cited articles in the *Global Journal of Drug Policy* to criticize the BC centre’s evaluation of Insite, the centre worked with the Vancouver-based Pivot Legal Society. Through freedom of information requests, the legal group discovered that the RCMP had paid for the reports printed in the journal, which, in response to media questions, the RCMP later confirmed.

The discovery “led to calls for greater oversight of the RCMP and a ban on political interference in science by policing organizations,” said Kerr, recipient of a Canadian Institutes for Health Research national knowledge translation award.

The BC centre also helped support, with research findings, Vancouver organizations when they took the federal government to the Supreme Court of British Columbia in an effort to prevent the closure of Insite, he said. As well, Kerr said, more than 100 researchers, physicians and public health officials endorsed a 2007 commentary by Dr. Stephen Hwang, a noted researcher with the Li Ka Shing Knowledge Institute at Toronto’s St. Michael’s Hospital. Hwang drew an analogy between evidence of harm reduction from safe injection sites and a (fictional) intervention that could reduce complications from diabetes, and drew into question the federal government’s hostility toward the former (*Open Medicine* 2007: vol 1, No. 2).

The BC court ruling in 2008 gave Insite a constitutional exemption to stay open and struck down parts of Canada’s drug laws. However, the federal government is appealing the decision.

Kerr said he is frustrated that the federal government, with no scientific evidence, continues to support drug courts in several major cities. Drug courts are a form of judicial diversion in which individuals who plead guilty to drug-related crimes can go to treatment to avoid jail time, he explained.

“No peer reviewed study has found that drug courts work, except some evidence that the approach is effective for first-time offenders on marijuana charges. Despite this, drug courts are being expanded.” — Ann Silversides, *CMAJ*

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