



SOUNDS OF SILENCE: A recent walk in Prospect Park was surprisingly quiet for an Acton woman, who realized there was silence because there were no geese on the lake. – Submitted photo

Student substance abuse rates continue to decline

Halton fights drug misuse rates with prevention, harm reduction, enforcement and treatment

Experts' research shows that at best, efforts to stop adolescents from using drugs are short-lived, so Halton will aim for the "more feasible goals" of trying to delay the first substance use, and preventing or minimizing harmful consequences.

In a student substance abuse update to Halton's Health and Social Services committee last Tuesday, Halton's Commissioner and Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Bob Nosal said Halton will now monitor student use of high-caffeine energy drinks – the second most commonly used substance by half of all Ontario students. Mixing energy drinks with alcohol is the "biggest concern," Dr. Nosal said, especially in light of numbers that show binge-drinking rates in Halton are higher than those across the province.

"What we really want to look at is decreasing the harm associated with it," Dr. Nosal said, adding they will deal with the misuse of alcohol and energy drinks through education, skill building, and enforcement if required treatment and harm reduction.

There are no restric-

tions on labelling, sales or marketing of high-caffeine energy drinks, issues which Committee Chair, Acton Councillor Clark Somerville said cause a lot of concern, along with easy access of the power drinks. He said the former "power walls" of cigarettes have been replaced by energy drinks which are "right at the very front, right by the cashiers so its more of an impulse item."

Down trend in use

A provincial study showed the decade-long trend of declining rates of student substance misuse continues. No drug showed an increase in use, and there was a significant decrease in the use of cigarettes, cannabis and non-prescription opioid pain relievers. Alcohol remains the most commonly used drug by youth with 55 per cent of Grades seven through 12 reporting use, and 22 per cent reporting binge drinking – having five or more drinks on one occasion. One in 10 students in Ontario report injuring themselves or someone else as a result of their own drinking.

Cannabis remains the most common illicit drug used by students with approximately two per cent of Ontario students using cannabis daily, putting themselves at risk for brain changes including difficulty with attention span and memory. Just over one-fifth – 22 per cent – of students reported using cannabis in the past year.

The non-medical use

of opioid pain relievers is higher among Halton students than youth in the province. The majority of Ontario students reporting opioid use said they got the drugs from their own homes. Dr. Nosal said "another troubling aspect" of opioid use is the apparent rise in the number of youth injecting the opioids, as witnessed in the latest Needle Exchange Program numbers.

Cigarette use has reached an all-time low, but nine per cent of Ontario students – one-in-10 smoke cigarettes, and smokeless tobacco is now the ninth most commonly used drug.

Prevention activities

Halton's comprehensive approach to prevent substance misuse includes engaging youth, parents, schools, service providers, police, the community and policy-makers in developing strategies for action. Dr. Nosal said parents are one of the most important influences on youth – substance use

is lower among Grade 10 students who have nurturing parents who monitor them – and Halton staff are available to parents for education and support.

At Council's request, a Halton Cannabis Awareness Strategy is being developed by professionals from 12 agencies, along with students and parents, to increase awareness, dispel myths and reduce the harms associated with youth cannabis use. A new website mainly for parents – www.whataboutweed.org – is slated for launch on April 30. There will also be some parent/youth interactive aspects to the site.

In conclusion, Dr. Nosal said substance misuse among youth remains a health concern, and guided by evidence, best practice and Ontario Public Health Standards, Regional staff will continue to use a comprehensive approach to deal with substance use prevention among Halton youth.

Halton needle exchange and harm reduction efforts

There are some startling numbers about youth IV drug use in the recently released update on Halton's Needle Exchange Program – the number of intravenous needles distributed to 16 to 19-year-olds increased by 340 per cent, to 3,927 last year, up from 1,115 needles in 2010. The number of occasions where youth requested needles last year more than doubled to 60 exchanges from the previous year. In contrast, IV exchanges in people 20 to 25 years old decreased by 29 per cent to 70 occasions from 98 in 2010.

In Acton, where the needle exchange program is run out of Halton sexual health clinic in the Sobeys plaza, there were 26 contacts from clients last year, up from 20 in 2010. The majority were for needles exchanges, but staff also supply harm reduction items including condoms, sterile water, alcohol swabs, drug cookers and safer crack use kits.

The annual activity report shows that in 2011, the total number of client contacts in Halton was 977, with clients receiving needle exchange services on 862 occasions, and staff providing information, counselling and referrals on 115 occasions. Requests for harm

reduction services were up seven per cent over 2010 at 977.

Halton has offered a needed exchange program since 2001 as part of the Ministry of Health and Long Term Care mandate to reduce the transmission of blood-borne diseases. In addition to providing needles for intravenous injection of illicit drugs, needles are also supplied to intramuscular injection of steroids.

Looking at the 10-year-old program, Cate Bannan, Halton's Manager of Sexual Health and Needle Exchange program, said along with other neighbouring municipalities that offer a similar needle exchange programs, they noticed a significant increase in clients in 2010, an increase attributed to the increase in the number of clients who feel comfortable with and trust the staff who deliver the programs.

Bannan said a "wonderful step forward" is the establishment of four private methadone clinics operating in Burlington and Oakville – one in Milton recently closed – people requiring methadone treatment no longer have to leave the Region for help, although Acton and Georgetown residents must travel out of town for treatment.



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	- Easter Service of Worship 10:30am
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Sunday April 29	- Mission Awareness Sunday 10:30am with Speaker Ann Morris