

'BE KIND' IS THE FIRST PHILOSOPHY OF SUPERVISED INJECTION SITE

IT'S A SAFE PLACE FOR AN OVERWHELMING ILLNESS, WRITES PHYSICIAN ALAM



NADIA ALAM
Column

The OMA holds a President Tour each fall. This year I added more stops. Doctors are busy. I wanted to meet them where they're at and see first-hand what they do. Below is one such story.

"I told my brother, don't give me Narcan till I turn blue. Then I overdosed. I did it to show my son: don't follow me down this road."

His face is worn, hair and beard unkempt. Fear, sadness,

resignation warring on his face. He tightens the tourniquet on his arm and slowly injects into his bruised veins. He watches me watching him.

I pause. "Did it work?" He nods.

I didn't know what to expect, never having visited a supervised injection site before. A blank slate. But now I've visited two - one in London-Middlesex, one in Ottawa - and a third one is booked.

The places are familiar and unfamiliar. Clean and medical. Rooms full of sterile supplies, syringes, needles, sharps containers. Yet gritty with a reality I don't know.

I watch a woman moaning from a bad high, a worker quietly calming her.

"The drugs are more potent, more addictive now," Dr. Jeffrey Turnbull said earlier that day.

The Ottawa site saw maybe 30 users a day; now it's supervising 120 to 150.

The patients are afraid. The opioid crisis is a battleground. They speak of their illness, how they started, the drugs -

"Heroin laced with fentanyl? More like fentanyl laced with heroin."

"Now there's a fentanyl resistant to Narcan."

"I just want to live to the end of the year."

And that's the thing: their illness is so overwhelming, here at least is a safe space where, for a moment, they have control. Supervised consumption sites link people struggling with addiction to hope. And maybe one day, treatment and recovery.

"We start with one philosophy: Be kind." Dr. Chris Mackie and Sonja Burke have seen thousands of patients since opening Ontario's first temporary overdose prevention site in February. London's overdose rates are 50 per cent higher than anywhere else in the province. The workers witness several overdoses a day - and literally, save lives. Supervised consumption sites help people survive long enough to get treatment. One couple, treated and now recovering, sent a

thank you card: "You saved us. Gave us hope."

These are people who don't respond to conventional treatment. So there is pressure to see things differently, do things differently. Ottawa started trialing injectable dilaudid six months ago.

"We gave them a home," Turnbull smiles. "When they became addicted, their lives and development just stopped. Now, they're learning again. How to cook. Clean. Work. Volunteer. How to live a life."

On Oct. 22, after weighing all the evidence, the Ontario government chose to continue funding supervised consumption sites.

Nadia Alam is a Georgetown physician and president of the Ontario Medical Association. She can be reached at nadia.alam@oma.org.

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By Cory Soal
R.H.A.D.

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