

Doctors of BC submission to the Select Standing Committee on Health

August 5, 2022

Thank you for providing us with the opportunity to participate in the Select Standing Committee on Health's consultation on the overdose and drug toxicity crisis.

Doctors of BC recognizes the severe impact that this crisis has had on British Columbians and believes immediate action must be taken in order to respond to this ongoing public health emergency. The drug toxicity crisis is incredibly complex; a multi-pronged, coordinated approach across all levels of the health care system is required to meet this challenge.

Community based programs and services

We believe enhanced coordination of and improved access to a range of community-based, culturally appropriate, and evidence-informed substance use prevention, harm reduction, and treatment programs and services is needed to make meaningful progress on this issue. Prevention efforts must include increased access to health and social programs and services to address social determinants of health. This includes prevention strategies directly aimed at preventing problematic substance use, supporting mental well-being, and improving access to social services such as supportive, stable housing and employment. We are pleased to see that the provincial government has developed a poverty reduction strategy (TogetherBC) and believe it is imperative that funding and resources are dedicated to implementing the action items from this strategy.

Safer Supply

In order to reduce harm, efforts must be made to separate people from the toxic drug supply and prevent unintentional toxic drug poisoning or overdose. Doctors of BC recognizes that programs offering pharmaceutical alternatives are an important life-saving measure, but careful consideration should be given to improve access to these programs while mitigating potential risks, including the risk of diversion. Robust evaluation of these programs is needed to ensure these goals are met.

Physicians who wish to participate in the provision of safer pharmaceutical alternatives should be supported by government with the training and resources needed to do so. This should include improved training and education on substance use and addiction medicine throughout medical school, residency, and physicians' professional careers. However, consideration should also be given to the exploration and evaluation of models offering safer pharmaceutical alternatives that do not require physician prescribing.

Exemption to remove criminal penalties for possession of some illicit drugs

The recent exemption BC received to decriminalize possession of some illicit drugs for personal use is also a welcome step forward, and we applaud the government's efforts in this regard.

Decriminalization of the possession of drugs for personal use is needed to reduce stigma by treating illicit drug use as a public health issue rather than a crime, and better allows for drug users to connect with a range of evidence-based health and treatment services. Evaluating the impact of this temporary exemption on health outcomes and treatment services will be extremely important; we hope the government would advocate to make the exemption permanent if it is found to have beneficial impacts.

Expand engagement with doctors

Finally, we recommend that the government expand its engagement with Doctors of BC and physicians across the province in order to receive critical physician input into the development, implementation, and evaluation of substance use programs and services. By working together, we can ensure that BC's health care system is united and well-coordinated in its efforts to address this public health emergency.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide this submission to the Committee.