

## MEDICALLY SUPERVISED INJECTING CENTRES

The Victorian AIDS Council (VAC) supports the establishment of medically supervised injecting centres throughout Victoria. Areas with a high incidence of drug-related harm should be identified and targeted for expedited roll-out of these services.

**WHAT ARE MEDICALLY SUPERVISED INJECTING CENTRES?**

Medically supervised injecting centres (MSICs) are facilities where people can inject drugs under medical supervision. This helps reduce and prevent many of the harms associated with injecting drug use. The facilities are supervised by specially-trained medical professionals who can provide information about safer drug use practices, referrals to dependence treatment, and other medical services. In the event of overdose, medical staff can provide first aid and, if necessary, rapid connections to emergency medical services.

These facilities do not provide drugs or allow the distribution of drugs on premises. They neither promote nor condemn drug use. They exist to reduce drug-related harm and help address many of the social and economic factors that contribute to, and exacerbate, problematic drug use. In addition to medical services and sterile injection equipment, these facilities can link clients to mental health services, social welfare services, and sexual health services. They also help improve the safety and amenity of the areas surrounding them.

The establishment of MSICs in Victoria would be incredibly valuable. In 2016 alone, Victoria saw at least 257 deaths due to drug overdose with illegal substances.<sup>1</sup> It continues to see several new diagnoses of HIV each year where injection drug use was a factor.<sup>2</sup>

**EVIDENCE AND CURRENT PRACTICE**

MSICs have existed since 1986, when the first facility opened in Switzerland. Since then, more than 90 facilities have been established throughout Europe, with additional facilities opening in Vancouver and Sydney. Evidence from these sites shows they contribute to significant reductions in the transmission of blood-borne viruses like HIV and hepatitis and help link hard-to-reach communities with essential health services.<sup>3</sup>

Despite fears to the contrary, these facilities do not encourage or increase drug use, but rather reduce risky consumption practices.<sup>4</sup> MSICs do not increase crime or drug distribution in their vicinity, but rather reduce the

incidence of public drug use around them and reduce the number of discarded needles, improving the safety of the surrounding community.<sup>5</sup> Remarkably, no MSICs have reported an overdose death in the more than 30 years they have existed.<sup>6</sup>

Currently, the MSIC located in Sydney's Kings Cross neighbourhood is the only facility located in Australia. Since opening in 2001, the Sydney MSIC has provided significant benefits to the area it serves. Public injection of drugs has decreased by 49 per cent, with the number of discarded needles and syringes decreasing by the same amount.<sup>7</sup> Most clients further report a dramatic reduction in the frequency they share injecting equipment, with most refraining from it entirely.<sup>8</sup> This reduces the risk of exposure to blood-borne viruses like HIV, as well as the risk of infection and injury related to injecting.

**RECOMMENDATION**

The Victorian Government should pass the *Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Pilot Medically Supervised Injecting Centre) Bill 2017*. While this bill seeks to trial a single MSIC for 18 months, decades of existing evidence clearly supports MSICs. The Victorian Government should further legislate for permanent MSICs and begin identifying and developing sites for their establishment.

**REFERENCES**

- <sup>1</sup> Hinchey, S. (17 March 2017). Submission of Her Honour Judge Sara Hinchey to the Inquiry into Drug Law Reform. Coroners Court of Victoria, p.35.
- <sup>2</sup> Victorian Department of Health and Human Services. (2016). HIV/AIDS monthly surveillance report - December 2016. Victorian Government, 1 Treasury Place, Melbourne, p.3.
- <sup>3</sup> Hedrich, D., Kerr, T. And Dubois-Arber, F. (2010). Chapter 11: Drug consumption facilities in Europe and beyond. In: *EMCDDA Monographs: Harm reduction: evidence, impacts and challenges*. (eds. T. Rhodes and D. Hedrich). European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Addiction, European Union, p.317.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid p.312.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid p.320.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid p.315.
- <sup>7</sup> Salmon, A., Kaldor, J. and Maher, L. (2007). Sydney medically supervised injecting centre evaluation report no. 4: Evaluation of service operation and overdose-related events. National Centre for HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research, Sydney, pp.7-8.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid p.17.

Date of publication: August 2017