



Harm Reduction
Nurses Association

Association des
infirmiers et infirmières
en réduction des méfaits

An Open Letter to Federal Party Leaders

Re: Election 44 and Canada's Poisoned Drug Supply

August 31st 2021

Revised: October 18th 2021

Today is International Overdose Awareness Day. It is a day of collective grief, loss, and solidarity. In Canada, it is a day where we look back at the last five years of the neglected public health crisis, and reaffirm our commitment to putting an end to the preventable deaths. It is a day, we hope, where those who wish to lead this country cast aside their platitudes and commit to meaningful solutions.

The [Harm Reduction Nurses' Association](#) (HRNA) is a non-profit organization which represents nurses and harm reduction advocates from across Canada. Our advocacy efforts are focused on ensuring the rights and dignity of people who use drugs – not only the patients we care for, but our friends, our families and ourselves. From [January 2016 to December 2020, over 21,000 recorded overdose deaths](#) occurred in Canada due to a poisoned drug supply. This is a crisis of injustice with an inequitable distribution of deaths. For Indigenous people, past and current processes of racist and colonial policy have directly influenced [disproportionate rates of drug poisoning deaths, targeted criminalization, and incarceration](#). As harm reduction nurses, we bear witness to these deaths and the impacts on grieving communities across Canada.

The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to an unbelievable intensification of drug poisoning deaths with an increasingly toxic and unpredictable drug supply. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the health of people who use drugs through worsening economic precarity and housing insecurity, as well as shut down or reduction in health services across Canada. The drug poisoning crisis is currently claiming the lives of [17 Canadians every day](#); that is approximately 1 Canadian every hour and twenty minutes. Over 6200 Canadians died of overdose in 2020, a 60% increase from 2019. Data from the first few months of 2021 suggests that this rate shows no sign of decreasing; in some parts of the country, more people have died from the toxic drug supply than from COVID-19.

The upcoming federal election is an opportunity for the political parties in Canada to devote the same attention and resources allocated towards addressing COVID-19 into putting an end to deadly and misinformed drug policy. The HRNA calls on every federal party leader in Canada to endorse and commit to the following evidence-informed, ethical, and pragmatic interventions:

Decriminalization

The ongoing criminalization of people who use drugs is rooted in colonization, racism, and systemic oppression. Drug prohibition fuels the toxic drug supply, driving up the volatility and inconsistency of illegal substances. As nurses working on the front lines of this crisis, we see firsthand the harms generated through criminalizing drug use. The decriminalization of currently-illegal substances is supported by a [substantial body](#) of national and provincial drug policy experts, scientists, and experts. It is time for all federal party leaders to make ending the War on Drugs a priority in this election and beyond.

Safer Supply

Nurses have a unique perspective on the inadequacy of pilot safer supply programs, which rely on medical diagnoses and prescription pads to address the toxic drug supply. At present, safe supply is widely inaccessible even in provinces that have embraced the approach publicly. People who use drugs should not have to rely on a stigmatizing health care system to obtain uncontaminated substances that may save their lives. A public health approach that does not subject individuals to prescriber gate-keeping would ensure equitable, low-barrier access to a consistent safe supply of drugs. We call on federal party leaders to commit to a de-medicalized model for safe supply that centres and affirms the lives of people who use drugs.

National Harm Reduction Support

Although health care has been enshrined as a universal right for all Canadians, access to harm reduction is under attack across Canada. Supervised consumption sites have been closed, or forced to rely on private donations. Harm reduction services in Alberta particularly are being dismantled by a government keen to risk the lives of its people on the basis of ideology and rhetoric. Life-saving programs like injectable opioid agonist therapy are rarely funded, and existing programs are at-risk of losing funding. We call on federal party leaders to tell Canadians how they plan to safeguard and expand harm reduction in provinces experiencing deadly regressive policies.

Indigenous-led and Decolonized Harm Reduction and Decriminalization

The criminalization of Indigenous people is intrinsically linked the ongoing consequences of historical and current colonial policy in Canada. We are in a crisis of racism in the criminal justice system and healthcare services, with few low-barrier options for culturally safe and Indigenous-led supports for on-reserve, rural, and urban Indigenous communities. We call on federal party leaders to describe how they will meaningfully work with Indigenous people who use drugs and Indigenous communities on

decriminalizing drug policy. Further, we ask party leaders how they will prioritize self-determining, Indigenous-led and developed harm reduction and support initiatives.

Meaningful Consultation with People Who Use Drugs

Lastly, HRNA is committed to a spirit of collaboration with people who use drugs. They are the experts, and as such, should be given the means and support to lead us out of this devastating emergency. There continues to be a substantial gap wherein people who use drugs are not adequately consulted, engaged, and compensated for their invaluable experiences and insights. The HRNA calls on federal party leaders to put an end to tokenizing behaviors, and commit to all future policy development being inclusive of the people most impacted by that policy.

Today is International Overdose Awareness Day. The time for politicians and decision-makers to issue their thoughts and prayers is over. Every overdose death is preventable. Every overdose death is a policy failure. Today we stand in unity with all those grieving the loss of a loved one, and call on Canada's leaders to put an end to toxic drug policy.

Signed,

Harm Reduction Nurses Association (HRNA)

National Signatories

Canadian Association of People Who Use Drugs (CAPUD)
Canadian Drug Policy Coalition (CDPC)
Moms Stop the Harm
HIV Legal Network
Each + Every: Businesses for Harm Reduction
Urgent Public Health Need Sites (UPHNS) Community of Practice
Doctors Against Prohibition (DAP)
MySafe Society

Provincial/Municipal Signatories

BC Centre on Substance Use (BCCSU)
Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario (RNAO)
The Homelessness Services Association of BC (HSABC)
Alberta Nurses Coalition for Harm Reduction (ANCHR)
The Doctor Peter AIDS Foundation
The Drug User Liberation Front (DULF)
Ontario Network of People who Use Drugs (ONPUD)
Coalition of Substance Users of the North (CSUN)
AVI Health & Community Services
Ottawa Inner City Health

Crackdown Podcast
Streetworks
Peel Drug Users Network (PDUN)
Brantford Substance Users Network (BSUN)
Friends of Medicare
Luminate Wellness
Island Sexual Health Society
Le Dispensaire
Powell River Community Action Team
Substance Users Teaching Advocacy Instead of Neglect (S.U.S.T.A.I.N.)
Diversity Equity and Inclusion Working Group
Aboriginal Coalition to End Homelessness

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