

August 30, 2023

Hon. Jennifer Whiteside
Minister of Mental Health and Addictions

Hon. Adrian Dix
Minister of Health

Re: International Overdose Awareness Day- August 31, 2023

Dear Ministers Whiteside and Dix:

August 31 is [International Overdose Awareness Day \(IOAD\)](#). On the day, we acknowledge the devastating impacts of the poisoned, unregulated drug supply. We honour and hold space for the thousands of lives lost to preventable drug poisonings. We stand in solidarity with the countless bereaved British Columbians mourning their loved ones, friends and family who are no longer with us.

We also stand firmly alongside people who use/d drugs in their ongoing call for meaningful policy change and action to end the public health emergency that has been raging in this province for over seven years. The unregulated drug supply is claiming the lives of [six British Columbians every day](#). As nurses, we see the harms of this crisis firsthand. We have seen the unregulated drug supply become increasingly dangerous to one contaminated with unpredictable adulterants, many of which complicate our ability to respond effectively. Our ability to resuscitate is hampered because sometimes the naloxone is ineffective and/or it can take people hours to be awakened as a result of the benzodiazepine and other non-opioid sedatives that contaminate the supply. As nurses, we also bear witness to a poisoned drug supply that results in increasingly complex wounds, the severity of which is often life-altering.

In addition to the care we provide, it is also our job to advocate for and uplift the voices of our patients. When we engage in outreach or interact with people in emergency departments, we hear overwhelmingly that people are in fear for their lives and are acutely aware that the drug supply is contaminated with bromazolam, fentanyl, and xylazine. Driven by the values of our profession, nurses provide safe, ethical, and compassionate care that honours everyone's right to the highest attainable health, a right to safety, and a right to access health care. Governments of the past and today have agreed that their role includes regulating substances for the safety of citizens. Today this includes regulation of alcohol, cannabis, and nicotine with the purpose of reducing the harm of these substances. However, the result of decades of antiquated drug law rooted in stigma around the use of "illicit" substances means regulation does not support the full spectrum of safe supply options that British Columbians need. We see the sad result of this in the staggering number of daily deaths and in the over 10,000 lives needlessly lost since 2016.

In recognition of IOAD, the Association of Nurses and Nurse Practitioners of BC (NNPBC), Workers for Ethical Substance Use Policy (WESUP) and the Harm Reduction Nurses Association (HRNA) are writing to you in solidarity with all those who are no longer afforded a voice because their lives have been cut short due to a worsening and preventable public health emergency. Today we call your attention to two resolutions that were passed near-unanimously at the recent [BC Nurses Union](#) convention, and join the BCNU in asking for your immediate action on the following:

1. Provision of a regulated system of safe drug supply for individuals who currently rely on the illegal drug market.
2. Develop a system of mental health, treatment and recovery, and substance use services that are regulated, evidence-based, economically and geographically accessible, and available when people are looking for it.

Whether we are talking about the toxic drug supply, or treatment and recovery services, a lack of regulation causes harm. While the research to-date on prescribed safer supply is [overwhelmingly positive](#), policy in BC (and across Canada) is at risk of being driven by outdated rhetoric and ideology not based on evidence. Nursing professionals stand at the ready to provide the ethical and evidence-based solutions that are essential in mitigating harm. As organizations that represent nursing professionals, we have the knowledge and expertise to provide context on the harms of this crisis, as well as present additional solutions and opportunities grounded in our daily work and in the perspectives of those who use substances. We know that the status quo is not serving the greater good, and it is time for radical and swift action.

The HRNA, WESUP, and NNPBC will look forward to engaging in dialogue with your respective ministries to end this crisis.

