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Harm Reduction

Indigenous Knowledge tells us not to declare a war on drugs and addictions.

Harm Reduction saves lives.

Harm reduction is a way of being that helps people (no matter what their choice is about drug and alcohol use) to reduce risks associated with substance use for themselves, their families and communities. Harm reduction helps restore wellness and ensures that First Nation's right to good health is possible. Harm reduction is not about making people choose abstinence. It is about ensuring life... it is life promotion without stigma or judgement.

People need to feel supported, not judged or shamed. There are some who still believe buprenorphine-naloxone and methadone are just swapping one addiction for another. However, opioid replacement drugs help to deal with painful withdrawal symptoms.

Just as insulin is necessary for people to live with diabetes, buprenorphine-naloxone is effective for people with opioid dependence. But drug replacement therapy will not reduce the harms alone, instead, medication such as buprenorphine-naloxone is most effective when people have the support of family, community, culture and connection to land.

Medications to address symptoms of withdrawal from drugs are necessary to give people the best chance at wellness. Some people who use drugs may choose treatment to address the unresolved trauma in their life and some may not. But just as we would not punish people on insulin for not eating right or exercising, we should not cast out or shame people who need drug replacement therapy to live their lives, keep a job, or parent their children. Instead, let's celebrate each day our relations are alive and together let's stay committed to wellness through harm reduction.

Examples of Harm Reduction

- Distribution of drug use supplies: needles, pipes, sanitizing wipes, drug checking kits
- Supervised consumption sites or overdose prevention services for people who use drugs by injection and inhalation
- Drug checking supplies
- Access to drug replacement therapies, i.e., buprenorphine-naloxone or cannabis
- Managed access to alcohol
- Health promotion to educate about blood borne infectious diseases such as HIV, Hepatitis C (often transmitted through shared drug use equipment)
- Support programs, group meetings
- Outreach to support access to safe emergency shelter, food, clothing, hygiene, etc.

*We are connected to all things—people, plants, trees, animals, water and rocks.
We are all related to one another and need to look after each other.*

*Kindness and caring are gifts from the Creator that our spirit carries
into this world when we are born. When we nurture this gift
through relationships we learn about respect.*

Harm Reduction

What is Drug Replacement Therapy?

- An effective treatment for people who use opioids such as heroin, oxycodone, hydromorphone, and fentanyl.
- Involves taking an opioid replacement, or exit drug (buprenorphine-naloxone or methadone) to prevent withdrawal, reduce cravings for opioids and stabilize health.



Buprenorphine-naloxone is

- a pill dissolved under the tongue
- easier to access than methadone
- prescribed by a physician and some nurse practitioners and has a lower risk of overdose than methadone, with fewer side effects
- Sublocade is another brand of buprenorphine given by injection
- Probuphine is an implant that last up to 6 months



Methadone is

- taken as a pill or a drink
- prescribed with specialized training
- dispensed by a pharmacy/clinic and is less available in most First Nations communities
- time consuming to determine an effective dose



Cannabis is

- helpful in addressing opioid addiction when prescribed by a physician
- a good way to provide relief from painful withdrawal symptoms
- an alternative to opioids for pain management
- a medicine that Elders warn to use with caution and not to be used for self-medication, because abuse or misuse weakens the medicine's ability to work



Quitting Cold Turkey?

Quitting opioids is not like quitting alcohol because opioids change the way the brain works and quitting cold turkey can result in extreme withdrawal symptoms, including unbearable pain, nausea and depression.

Consider a harm reduction approach to reduce or stop opioid use over time.

A harm reduction approach can include the use of drugs, i.e. buprenorphine-naloxone, methadone or cannabis.