

Why we need to talk about harm reduction on World AIDS Day

World AIDS Day, December 1st, is a day to commemorate those who have passed from HIV/AIDS. It is also a day to acknowledge the advances in HIV treatment which has changed the HIV epidemic from a death sentence to a chronic manageable disease. Yet on this day we must also recognize the work that still needs to be done in order to prevent the spread of HIV and improve people's quality of life.

One population that is at risk of acquiring HIV is people who use drugs. It has been documented that harm reduction programming has been effective in preventing the spread of HIV among this population. Harm reduction programming has both health and economic benefits,^{1,2,3} but the accessibility of these programs is not equitable across Canada.⁴ This is why we need to talk about harm reduction on World AIDS Day.

Harm reduction aims to minimize death, disease, and injury from high-risk behavior by promoting safer drug use practices. Harm reduction programming includes safer drug use supply distribution, referrals to drug treatment and counselling, and health promotion activities. Harm reduction consists of a non-judgmental approach to delivering health services and aims to treat people who use drugs with respect, dignity, and compassion.(ref)

The [Best Practice Recommendations Document](#) for Canadian Harm Reduction Programs (2013)³ provides evidence-based guidelines for harm reduction programs which if practiced can prevent the spread of HIV, HCV, and other harms to people who use drugs. Recommendations include providing a sterile needle/syringe, cooker, filter, and water for every injection. Alcohol swabs should be provided to clean the injection site and tourniquets and VitC should be made available to those who need them. Harm reduction sites are also encouraged to utilize a variety of strategies to promote the return of used injection equipment. The Best Practice Recommendations also highlight the importance of providing harm reduction programming in low barrier settings in order to increase access to harm reduction supplies.

Our program, the Ontario Harm Reduction Distribution Program (OHRDP), provides harm reduction supplies to the 36 core Needle Syringe Programs across Ontario as suggested by the Best Practice Recommendations.⁴ Along with harm reduction supplies we provide programs with educational resources and harm reduction programming support.

The theme for World AIDS Day 2013 is "Getting to zero". Zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination, and zero AIDS-related deaths.⁵ By helping programs in Ontario move from best practice to principles practiced we hope to be contributing, in our own small way, to World AIDS Day 2013.

References

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5. CATIE - World AIDS Day 2013. Available from: <http://www.catie.ca/en/world-aids-day>