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Vancouver—Supervised Injection Site to Combat Drug Abuse

Question by:

The Honourable Larry W. Campbell

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THE SENATE

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VANCOUVER—SUPERVISED INJECTION SITE TO COMBAT DRUG ABUSE

Hon. Larry W. Campbell: Honourable senators, in keeping with my reputation for being non-partisan, I will begin my question to the Leader of the Government in the Senate with kudos.

The Minister of Health convened a panel to look into 24 scientific papers published on Insite, the supervised injection site in the City of Vancouver. They could have appointed whack jobs who call themselves “scientists,” who in fact are only ideologues, but they did not. I believe they chose a fair and unbiased panel. The report is now in. That report has confirmed what the 24 peer-reviews and published papers stated. Insite increases the use of addiction treatment; reduces the prevalence of syringe sharing; reduces public disorder; does not lead to greater levels of crime; saves lives from and prevents overdose; provides education for HIV, hepatitis, abscesses, drug effects, et cetera; and provides addicts with access to a health care provider. This is what we knew from the papers commissioned by the previous government for the research.

My question is for the Leader of the Government in the Senate. Can she please clarify the Conservative government’s position with regard to Insite? Can she give Canadians a sense of whether we can expect a long-term exemption so that Vancouver Coastal Health can move forward on improving services, promoting treatment and saving lives?

Some Hon. Senators: Hear, hear!

Hon. Marjory LeBreton (Leader of the Government and Secretary of State (Seniors)): I wish to thank the honourable senator for that question.

The Minister of Health sought out research and advice from qualified individuals. As the senator knows, we have extended Insite until June 30 of this year. The minister is currently studying the issue and a decision will be made as soon as possible.

• (1450)

Having said that, it is important to point out that the government has taken major steps on the whole issue of drug abuse. On April 28, we announced the Drug Treatment Funding Program, which provides \$111 million over five years to provincial and territorial governments to boost drug treatment that is available to young people who are at risk.

We are committed to working with the provincial and territorial partners to improve access to quality services and effective approaches to treating individuals who pose a risk to other individuals or to themselves, their families and their communities.

This announcement builds upon an announcement last year of a new National Anti-Drug Strategy to prevent young people from becoming involved in drugs, to support treatment services for those with addictions and to combat the production and distribution of illicit drugs. Minister Clement has also launched a national prevention campaign aimed at youth and their parents. Honourable senators have probably seen some of that in our newspapers and on television.

The important aspect here is that we realize that drug abuse is a serious problem in the country. We have invested significant funds to combat the problem.

Of course, the honourable senator is asking specifically about the Insite program in Vancouver, and as I said in my earlier response, the minister will make an announcement as soon as he is able to do so.

Senator Campbell: I appreciate anything the government does to help with treatment for addicts. Unfortunately, in the second case that the leader mentioned, the government has followed what all governments have followed and that is enforcement rather than treatment, prevention and harm reduction. We continually call this “a problem.” It is not a problem, it is an illness. It is no different from cancer or any other illness. We must get away from calling this something it is not.

Last week 800 crosses were erected in Oppenheimer Park in Vancouver. Those crosses represent the people who have died due to drug-related addictions. Brothers, sisters, sons, daughters; for anyone here who has lost someone, it does not matter how he or she died, it matters what we can do to prevent it from happening again. We need to move forward with regard to treatment.

Perhaps one of the things the minister can answer — and I do not understand — is how the Conservative government continues to delineate among jurisdictions. In other words, the federal government has a responsibility, the provincial government has a responsibility and the municipalities are children of the province. There is a myth out there that the federal government actually puts money into the Insite program. The federal government does not put money into that program. They put up \$1.5 million over the first three years, specifically to investigate what was going on, and that was at our insistence.

Each year \$3 million comes out of the health budget of the Province of British Columbia. Insite is completely supported by the premier, completely supported by the politicians and 78 per cent supported by the people. The question that I have is while health is a provincial matter, why would I need permission from the federal government to keep a health care facility open.

Senator LeBreton: First, I must take issue with what the honourable senator says, namely that we focus more on enforcement and not on treatment. That is absolutely not true.

• (1455)

Senator Di Nino: Right on!

Senator LeBreton: About 75 per cent of the monies that we expend is for treatment. The remainder is for enforcement.

Some federal money was allocated to the Vancouver Insite program, as the honourable senator points out. With regard to the specific question, I must confess to the honourable senator that since he claims this has nothing to do with the federal government, I find it curious why I would be asked the question. I will take that portion of the question as notice.