

The thorny issue of safe injection sites

This isn't a column about food banks. It's about the thornier issue of safe drug-injection sites, and ethical questions raised by this week's report recommending such sites in Toronto and Ottawa. But food banks and injection sites have more in common than we might admit . . . beyond the fact that nobody wants one in their neighbourhood.

The intentions of our little group of volunteers were the best. There were hungry people on the streets of our community. And while governments were talking about reducing child poverty and hunger in Canada, that end-goal seemed at least a decade away. So we started a food bank. Time passed. People donated tons of food and the client pool grew from 20, to 100, to 600 families a month.

Then the questions started. Some argued they were even perpetuating the problem of hunger — making people dependent, taking government off the hook for real solutions. As the number of clients grew, so did complaints from neighbours. Donor fatigue set in. Were we solving a problem — or making it worse?

Not even the most ardent advocate for safe injection sites would claim they are the solution to drug abuse. Most drug users who come in to an injection site leave no less dependent than when they came in . . . just as food bank clients leave as poor as they came in.

But Vancouver's Insite, Canada's flagship facility, does more than offer addicts a safe place to shoot up with clean needles. As good food banks today offer resources and advocacy beside the KD, Insite offers counselling, access to medical care, mental health services and other survival resources.

It's not surprising, that according to many studies, safe injection sites reduce the number of people who



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get sick, and die, from dirty needles and other contaminants that go along with injecting in back alleys.

In other words, such sites may not — no, do not — solve the problem of drug abuse along the margins of our society. But there's evidence that they can improve the lives of individual users, and even whole communities.

There are those who argue that safe sites encourage drug use. But in my years hanging around the food bank, I never met a single person who chose to be hungry simply because they could get free food. Can anyone seriously argue that someone would choose to be addicted to crack, just because there was a place where they could get clean needles free?

Would we have solved the problem of poverty by now if food banks had never been invented? Of course not. We wouldn't be one step closer — but the toll of human misery caused by poverty would be immeasurably higher.

Safe injection sites won't solve the circumstance in which addicts, especially poor addicts, find themselves. But they won't delay such a solution either. In the meantime, they might provide a modicum of dignity, support and community to some of our most desperate citizens.

Ethically, even when you can't do everything, doing something is still better than doing nothing.

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