



CANADIAN ASSOCIATION OF PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Statement on suspension of injectable opioid agonist treatment (iOAT) in Alberta

Personal health and safety at risk due to court ruling

Edmonton, AB—Canadian Association of People Who Use Drugs, Canadian Drug Policy Coalition, Friends of Medicare, Moms Stop the Harm, and HIV Legal Network are deeply concerned about the health and safety impacts to vulnerable individuals accessing life-saving injectable opioid agonist treatment (iOAT) in Alberta.

Yesterday, a court ruling upheld a decision by the Government of Alberta to end iOAT at clinics in Calgary and Edmonton by dismissing an injunction application to keep these vital, life-saving services running at those clinics. In our view, the ruling does not take into account the lived experience and perspectives of people who use drugs who attested to the benefits of the program and how ending it would threaten their health and safety. Earlier, the court heard that individuals suffering from severe opioid use disorder could face “irreparable harms including risk of death” if the government-funded treatment program is halted in March as planned. This included evidence that the Government’s decision to close the clinics has already contributed to severe harm to patients.

The current iOAT program, prior to the Province creating uncertainty with its decisions, had a reported retention rate of over 80%, which is much above typical rates for substance use treatment. The Province of Alberta has in the past stated that addiction treatment should include services that support people beyond their substance use, something this program has done. It offers wrap around care, including on-site social workers who connect people with housing, income and employment support, psychologists and psychiatrists who help people deal with their underlying issues, including trauma, and most importantly peers with lived experience who understand and relate to the challenges the iOAT patients are going through. All this has contributed to the success of the iOAT program and has saved lives. This wrap around support will not be available in the unspecified model proposed by the Province.

The recent ruling could result in individuals relying, once again, on a toxic supply of drugs from an unregulated, dangerous market outside a medical/community context and thus being exposed to the potential for further irreparable harm. It relied on an incomplete understanding of opioid use disorder and a lack of literacy around substance use, addiction, and the lives of people who use drugs. Once again, the voices and perspectives of people who use drugs—who are experts in their own experience—were not given sufficient weight in a decision directly impacting their health and wellbeing.

Justice Dunlop, in his ruling, is quoted stating, “a causal connection between the Province’s planned changes and iOAT patients returning to street opioid use has not been proved.” But harms have already surfaced due to the Alberta government’s transition planning over the last year. The evidence before the court demonstrated that the Government’s decision has already contributed to one death and other serious harm for patients. Patients anticipate experiencing further serious, and irreversible harm once the clinics are shuttered.

This ruling is especially concerning given the climate we now see ourselves in: two concurrent public health crises and a rise in overdose deaths across Canada due to COVID-19. It is precisely in times such as these that health services like iOAT should be expanded rather than scaled back. The decision to end these services in March is unconscionable and will risk the wellbeing of the plaintiffs in this trial.



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 MOMS STOP THE HARM

As individuals affected by the drug poisoning crisis, concerned citizens, health service providers, and professionals in the field, we are deeply troubled by the adverse health impacts that could follow from this decision. Lives are at stake.

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About Canadian Association of People Who Use Drugs

The Canadian Association of People who Use Drugs (CAPUD) is the national drug user organization in Canada. Our board and staff are comprised entirely of people who use(d) drugs. One of our main purposes is to empower people who currently use drugs deemed illegal to survive and thrive, with their human rights respected and their voices heard. We envision a world where drugs are regulated and the people who use them are decriminalized. We are survivors of this war and we'll continue to fight for policy reform that is based in evidence, understanding and compassion.

About Canadian Drug Policy Coalition

The Canadian Drug Policy Coalition (CDPC) is a coalition of over 50 organizations and 5,000 individuals working to support the development of progressive drug policy grounded in science, guided by public health principles, and respectful of human rights. CDPC operates as a project within Simon Fraser



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University's Faculty of Health Sciences. CDPC seeks to include people who use drugs and those harmed by the war on drugs in moving toward a healthier Canadian society free of stigma and social exclusion.

About Moms Stop the Harm

Moms Stop the Harm (MSTH) is a network of Canadian families impacted by substance use related harms and deaths. We advocate to change failed drug policies and provide peer support to grieving families and those with loved ones who use or have used substances.

About HIV Legal Network

The HIV Legal Network, formerly the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, promotes the human rights of people living with, at risk of or affected by HIV or AIDS, in Canada and internationally, through research and analysis, litigation and other advocacy, public education and community mobilization.

About Friends of Medicare

Friends of Medicare is a provincial coalition of individuals, service organizations, social justice groups, unions, associations, churches and other organizations whose goal is to raise public awareness on concerns related to Medicare in Alberta and Canada.