

On Wrong Behaviours Related to Drug Abuse, Why Can't We Just Say 'No?'

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British Columbia Health Minister Adrian Dix in a file photo. (The Canadian Press)



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Commentary

“Defining deviancy down” is a cultural philosophy that emerged in the United States during the 1990s. It refers to society’s tendency to adjust its standards of deviancy “down,” so that behaviours which were once

unacceptable become acceptable. Over time, this newly acceptable behaviour can even become society's norm.

Of course, the converse must also be true—society looks down on those who label social behaviours “wrong,” deeming them moralistic, judgmental, or simply out of touch with the realities of modern life.

Thirty years later, this philosophy is entrenched in British Columbia politics and policies. The province has become a society that cannot say “no” to harmful or wrong behaviours related to drug use. It doesn't matter if you view drug use as a medical issue, a law-and-order issue, or both—we have lost the ability to simply say “no” to harmful or wrong behaviour.

That much has become abundantly clear over the past two weeks as evidence mounts that B.C.'s experiment with decriminalization and safe supply of hard drugs is [only making things worse](#).

A [recently leaked memo](#) from B.C.'s Northern Health Authority shows the deleterious impact these measures have had on the province's hospitals.

The memo instructs staff at the region's hospitals to tolerate and not intervene with illegal drug use by patients. Apparently, staff should not be taking away any drugs or personal items like a knife or other weapons under four inches long. Staff cannot restrict visitors even if they are openly bringing illicit drugs into the hospital and conducting their drug transactions in the hallways.

The public was quite rightly outraged at the news, and B.C.'s Health Minister Adrian Dix quickly attempted to contain the mess by saying that the memo was outdated and poorly worded.

But his facile excuses were quickly exposed by publication of the very clearly worded memo and by nurses from across the province who came forward to tell their stories of what is really happening in our hospitals.

The president of the B.C. Nurses Union, [Adriane Gear](#), said the issue was “widespread” and “of significant magnitude.” She commented that the problems in hospitals spiked once the province decriminalized drugs. In a telling quote, she said, “Before there would

be behaviours that just wouldn't be tolerated, whereas now, because of decriminalization, it is being tolerated.”

Other nurses said the problem wasn't limited to the Northern Health Authority. They came forward (both anonymously and openly) to say that drug use and violence have become commonplace in hospitals. Drug-addicted patients openly smoke meth and fentanyl, and inject heroin. Dealers traffic illicit drugs. Nurses are harassed, forced to work amidst the toxic fumes from drugs, and can't confiscate weapons. In short, according to one nurse, “We've absolutely lost control.”

People think that drug policies have no impact on those outside of drug circles, but what about those who have to share a room with a drug-smoking patient?

No wonder health-care workers are demoralized and leaving in droves. Maybe it isn't just related to the chaos of COVID.

The shibboleth of decriminalization faced further damage when Fiona Wilson, the deputy chief of Vancouver's Police Department, **testified** before a federal Parliamentary committee to say that the **policy has been a failure**. There have been more negative impacts than positive, and no decreases in overdose deaths or the overdose rate. (If such data emerged from any other health-care experiment, it would immediately be shut down).

Wilson also confirmed that safe supply drugs are being re-directed to illegal markets and now **account for 50 percent of safe supply drugs** that are seized. Her words echoed those of B.C.'s nurses when she told the committee that the police “have absolutely no authority to address the problem of drug use.”

Once Mr. Dix and Premier David Eby stopped denying that drug use was occurring in hospitals, they continued their laissez-faire approach to illegal drugs **with a plan to create** “safe consumption sites” at hospitals. When that lacked public appeal, Dix said the province would establish a task force to study the issue.

What exactly needs to be studied?

The NDP government appears to be uninformed, at best, and dishonest, at worst. It has backed itself into a corner and is now taking frantic and even ludicrous steps to legitimize its experimental policy of decriminalization. The realities that show it is not working and is creating harm towards others and toward institutions that should be a haven for healing.

How quickly we have become a society that lacks the moral will—and the moral credibility—to just to say “no.”

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