



## AMA Victoria Policy Paper (2012)

### A Trial of Supervised Injecting Facilities in Victoria

#### Background

During 2011, AMA Victoria made a submission to the whole of government Victorian alcohol and drug strategy.

In the submission we called for consideration to be given to a trial of Supervised Injecting Facilities in Victoria. Our recommendations, which included that the Government conduct a review of the evidence relating to the trial in NSW, were developed after extensive consultation with our members and Board.

#### Heroin use in Victoria

Serious and ongoing harm continues to arise in our state as a result of heroin use.

In Victoria there were 2033 heroin related ambulance attendances in 2009/10 (an increase from 1903 in 2008/09) with 60% of the attendances occurring in a public space.

Attendances were also concentrated in certain areas with more than one in five attendances (22%) in Yarra City Council.<sup>1</sup>

These statistics are cause for serious concern and point to the need for a new approach for Victoria in order to minimise the harm resulting from drug use.

#### A Victorian model

A trial of Supervised Injecting Facilities in Victoria would provide:

- sterile injecting equipment and associated material;
- a means of safe disposal of injecting equipment;
- medical and counselling services;
- trained personnel in attendance to provide assistance in case of overdose;
- a direct telephone line to an ambulance service; and
- drug rehabilitation services.

A trial has significant potential to:

- lessen the public impact of street-based injecting;
- improve clients' access to primary medical care, drug treatment and health and other welfare services;
- reduce the incidence of fatal heroin-related overdose; and
- assist in reducing blood-borne viral transmission.

The trial would occur, with local community support, in areas with a high level of injecting drug users.

#### The NSW trial

The Supervised Injecting Facility in Sydney has now been in operation for ten years. Legislation to lift the trial status of the facility was passed in November 2010 and received bipartisan support in NSW.

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<sup>1</sup> Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre, *Trends in alcohol and drug related ambulance attendances in Melbourne: 2009/10*, Annual Report 2010.



The facility is supported by AMA (NSW) as well as the NSW Police Service, NSW Ambulance, and Royal Australasian College of Physicians.

Independent evaluation by KPMG in 2010 found it had successfully managed 3,426 overdose-related events, helped more than 12,000 injecting drug users and referred more than 8,500 drug users for help, including 3,870 to drug treatment. It has also distributed more than 300,000 clean needles and syringes to users.

### **Evidence**

A number of reports suggest that Supervised Injecting Facilities have the capacity to reduce the number of deaths from drug overdose, reduce ambulance call-outs and hospital admissions, improve patient outcomes, enhance referral to drug treatment programs, and improve public order (e.g., by reducing injecting drug use and syringe disposal in public locations).<sup>2</sup>

The National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2010 indicated that the majority of the Australian population support Supervised Injecting Facilities.<sup>3</sup>

There have been no overdose deaths at any supervised injecting centre to date, and the number of non-fatal overdose episodes relative to the number of supervised injections is very low.

Research in Frankfurt has shown that the likelihood of an overnight hospital admission for one night is 10 times greater for a person who overdoses on the street compared with one who overdoses in a safe injecting centre.<sup>4</sup>

### **International facilities**

There are now more than 80 similar Supervised Injecting Facilities in eight countries.

In September 2011, the Supreme Court of Canada unanimously ruled in favour of the continued operation of Vancouver's supervised drug injection site.

Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin, writing for the court, stated: "Where, as here, the evidence indicates that a supervised injection site will decrease the risk of death and disease, and there is little or no evidence that it will have a negative impact on public safety, the Minister should generally grant an exemption (from the law prohibiting possession of controlled substances)."

The Canadian Medical Association supported the ruling.

### **AMA Victoria policy**

Prior to 2012, AMA Victoria did not have a formal position on this issue however on 21 August 2012, formal approval was sought and granted from the AMA Victoria Council that AMA Victoria support a Victorian trial of Supervised Injecting Facilities.

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<sup>2</sup> A Ritter & J Cameron 'A review of the efficacy and effectiveness of harm reduction strategies for alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs', (2006) 25 *Drug and Alcohol Review* (2006) 611, 615-616.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2010 National Drug Strategy Household Survey report (2011) Drug statistics series, AIHW Cat. No. PHE 145.

<sup>4</sup> Wright, Nat M.J., Charlotte N.E. Tompkins, "Supervised Injecting Centres," *British Medical Journal*, Vol. 328, Jan. 10, 2004, p. 101.



Supervised Injecting Facilities are consistent with the AMA Victoria policy position on blood borne viral infections which supports programs which protect against these infections including needle exchange programs and the availability and proper use of condoms.