



Safe Supply

August 2020

Background

In April of 2016 then Provincial Health Officer, Dr. Perry Kendall declared the opioid crisis a public health emergency. This was due largely to the increase in overdose deaths in 2015 and 2016. Numerous measures were put in place during this crisis. These included increases in funding in areas of harm reduction and mental health services, the development of overdose prevention sites and other community-based initiatives coupled with de-stigmatizing and life-saving interventions around substance use. While deaths still occurred, these interventions proved beneficial as the number of deaths due to overdose had been decreasing over time, community-based interventions were supporting people who use substances, and our collective thinking and understanding of the opioid crisis was progressing. These progressive steps include normalizing language and perspectives around those who use substances. This is not to say it was beyond reproach, but conversations were occurring. Then in March of 2020 the World Health Organization declared a pandemic and in turn BC declared COVID-19 a public health emergency on March 18, 2020.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic overdose deaths have been increasing at an alarming and steady rate. May, June and July 2020 marked the deadliest months of this opioid crisis since December of 2016 with 171 lives lost in May, 175 in June and 175 in July. The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to this alarming rise because of an increasingly toxic drug supply and a higher incidence of people using drugs at home due to physical distancing guidelines, to name two key factors. While efforts are being made to reduce this number of deaths, the fact remains that lives are being lost to a crisis that is only worsening as we grapple with COVID-19 and the realities of competing resources and priorities during dual public health emergencies.

The Canadian Association of People Who Use Drugs describes safe supply as "a legal and regulated supply of drugs with mind/body altering properties that traditionally have been accessible only through the illicit drug market."ⁱ COVID-19 pushed this idea forward by making it clear that the current drug supply, new physical distancing requirements and reduced hours at pharmacies, clinics, overdose prevention sites and other harm reduction services led to an increasingly unstable, disrupted and toxic product. This in turn increased the likelihood of using substances alone, suffering from withdrawal symptoms and/or death from overdose. In March 2020 new provincial guidelines were issued that gave providers the ability to widely prescribe opioids stimulants, illicit benzodiazepines, tobacco and alcohol to those that met certain criteria such as being at high-risk of overdosing, going through withdrawal and who are at a high-risk of developing COVID-19. The overarching goal is to support self-isolation and the maintenance of physical distancing while also avoiding and preventing substance use related harm.ⁱⁱ It's estimated anecdotally that well over 1,000 people have accessed prescription alternatives since the guidelines were put into place.ⁱⁱⁱ

As written to NNPBC in a [statement published on our website](#), the BC Centre for Substance Use (BCCSU) notes: "Nurse practitioners can prescribe medications under this guidance, and all nurses can contribute to the safety of those in their care by familiarizing themselves with Risk Mitigation guidance. LPNs, RNs, and RPNs all can advocate for people who use drugs to have access to safer prescription medications to prevent withdrawal and other harms through this guidance; assist with access to these medications through nurse delivery of medications including opioid agonist therapy; and provide monitoring and assessment of patients in person or virtually as appropriate."

While many people have been able to access the safe supply through the new guidelines, stories have been reported of many not being able to access these prescription alternatives. In a CBC news story at the end of May, one woman reported not being able to get her prescription refilled while others have been turned away because they do not meet the qualifying criteria.^{iv} Other challenges noted by advocates are focused on barriers to access because the prescriptions must be picked up at pharmacies and problems with getting prescriptions written for many who live in smaller communities. Additionally, data continues to be collected on the efficacy of the new provincial guidelines which may require further revisions to ensure access to life-saving resources. And, of course it bears noting again that the rate of overdose deaths has only continued to climb.



As nurses, NNPBC supports safe-supply and commends the provincial government for enacting and implementing this life-saving measure in recognition of the terrible toll the opioid crisis has taken. While it is far from a perfect approach, data needs to be collected and changes need to be made, safe-supply has been a welcome step in reducing the harms of substance use.

Key Messages

- NNPBC supports 'safe-supply' to prevent unnecessary overdose deaths with a regulated supply in addition to bolstering other resources in assisting individuals who use drugs.
- Safe-supply has been a welcome step in working to mitigate the opioid crisis in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- NNPBC recognizes that the provincial guidelines regarding safe-supply have not been perfect but we applaud the effort and commitment to harm reduction.
- Nursing's reputation as the world's most trusted profession is based on its long history of working with the most vulnerable populations, often in times of crisis.
- Nurses have a responsibility to protect and advocate for at risk populations, such as those who use drugs.
- Nursing looks forward to providing feedback and a solutions-oriented approach to further harm reduction strategies such as decriminalization.
- NNPBC encourages policy makers to consider expanding access to safe supply by removing barriers for RN's and RPN's to facilitate access.

Further Reading/Resources

- [Harm Reduction Nurses Association](#)
- [Toward the Heart](#)
- [BCCSU](#)
- [BCCSU- Safe Supply](#)
- [Canadian Drug Policy Coalition](#)
- [Canadian Association of People who use Drugs](#)
- [Harm Reduction Coalition](#)
- [Moms Stop the Harm](#)
- [Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users](#)
- [Government of BC- Treatment and Support](#)
- [Trauma Informed Practice and Opioid Crisis](#)

Please feel free to direct questions and additional comments to info@nnpbc.com.

ⁱ CAPUD- [Safe Supply Concept Document](#). February 2019.

ⁱⁱ [BCCSU- Overview of Safe Supply Guidelines](#).

ⁱⁱⁱ CBC "[Hundreds of British Columbians are accessing province's 'safe supply' of drugs](#)". June 2020.