

Background

Supervised Consumption Facilities (SCFs) are spaces in which people are legally allowed to administer pre-obtained illicit drugs under medical supervision and in a hygienic environment. Most SCFs only allow drug injection (i.e., safe injection sites or supervised injection facilities) but some allow drug smoking (i.e., safe/supervised smoking sites/facilities). SCFs are often part of a complement of harm reduction services including education, sterile syringe distribution, medical care, social work, addiction care, counselling, and peer support.^{1,2} SCFs promote safer injection (e.g., decreased equipment sharing, decreased public injecting), facilitate access to health and addiction care, and reduce fatal overdose. SCFs are not associated with negative outcomes such as increased injection drug use, drug trafficking or crime in the surrounding neighbourhood.²

The Status of SCFs in Canada and Ontario

Since 1986, over 90 SCFs have operated in Canada, Australia, and Europe, mostly in Europe.³ There are currently two legally sanctioned SCFs in Canada, both in Vancouver: InSite – North America’s first legal SCF, opened in 2003 – and the Dr. Peter Centre – operational since 2002 but granted permission to operate in 2016. Although there are currently no SCFs in Ontario, feasibility studies have been or are currently being carried out in Toronto, Ottawa, London, Thunder Bay, and Hamilton.^{1,4,5}

Feasibility of SCFs in Ontario

The Toronto and Ottawa feasibility study shows that demand for SCFs is high, especially by people who are most at risk for harms from drug use, such as those who are unstably housed or are unaware of how to access sterile equipment. In both Toronto and Ottawa, multiple smaller facilities (3 in Toronto, 2 in Ottawa) are recommended over a large, centralized facility, all integrated with existing harm reduction services.¹

Public Opinion about SCFs in Ontario

Public support for supervised injection sites increased between 2003 and 2009 (13% vs. 27%) but public support for supervised smoking facilities remains lower than for supervised injecting facilities (20% vs. 28%).^{6,7} Despite growing approval, in 2008-2010, community stakeholders expressed concerns about SCFs’ locations, exacerbation of drug problems, and diversion of resources from other drug prevention or treatment efforts – although stakeholder opinion may have changed in recent years.⁸

The Future of SCFs in Ontario

In Canada, an SCF is permitted to operate once it is granted an exemption to the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act.⁹ Currently, exemptions are only to be granted in “exceptional circumstances” and only after meeting criteria that critics deem to be overly onerous.^{9,10} However, the federal government has recently proposed legislative amendments that will decrease the number of criteria to be met before an SCF can be opened.¹¹ In 2016, the Ottawa and Toronto Boards of Health voted to support the creation of SCFs in their cities.^{12,13} In December 2016, Toronto applied for exemptions to the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act for 3 SCFs and in January 2017, the Ontario government committed to providing financial support for SCFs in Ontario.^{14,15}

The status of SCFs in Ontario is changing quickly; information in this document reflects their status as of January 2016.

References

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