The Secretary
Legal and Social Issues Committee
Parliament House, Spring Street
East Melbourne
VIC 3002

21 April 2017

Dear Committee,

**RE: SUBMISSION TO THE PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO MEDICALLY SUPERVISED INJECTING FACILITIES**

On behalf of the Victorian Trades Hall Council (VTHC), I thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the review of this important bill.

Attached is the joint submission from VTHC and the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) Victorian Branch, in support of the proposed medically supervised injecting facility in Richmond. Such a facility would reduce risk for Victorian workers, and minimise harm for people who inject drugs.

Earlier this year I joined with fifty other organisations and experts to call on the Victorian Government to save lives and support the proposed MSIC trial in Richmond. The letter of support is attached.

If you have any questions, please contact Dane Bosler, Politics & Research Lead Organiser on [redacted]

Thank you for your consideration.

Yours Sincerely,

[Redacted]

LUKE HILAKARI
Secretary

DAVID CRAIGG
Assistant Secretary

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VTHC and ANMF Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Medically Supervised Injecting Centres: The Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Pilot Medically Supervised Injecting Centre) Bill 2017

April 2017
ABOUT VTHC

VTHC represents approximately 40 unions and 430,000 workers in Victoria. These workers are members of unions that reach into every industry in the state, both in the public and private sectors. Unions have always been at the forefront of protecting the rights of workers and dignity of all people, no matter their gender, ethnicity, sexuality or social circumstance. In this vein, we urge the Committee to endorse the proposed Pilot Medically Supervised Injecting Centre Bill.

This submission is intended to be read in full support of the untiring advocacy of the Ambulance Employees Association Victoria (AEAV), who are also making a submission in favour of the pilot medicinally supervised injecting centres (MSIC). Their submission makes a powerful case for MSICs, and the case studies they provided demonstrate firsthand how passionate our hard-working paramedics are about the safety and dignity of all Victorians, but also the risks they face simply by going to work. VTHC has the upmost respect for Victorian paramedics and implores the Committee to fully consider their recommendations.

It is our paramedics who are currently on the front line facing the many challenges of this issue. They are responding to overdoses and working tirelessly to efficiently respond to call-outs. It is also our nurses whose job it is to treat people who inject drugs, in hospitals and in rehabilitation centres. Community service workers are there at every step, assisting those who have overdosed, working on psychological trauma, and supporting people who take drugs to do whatever they can to minimise harm. It is our local government workers, whose job it is to clean the streets from discarded syringes or to respond to issues of public amenity. These workers are often in danger due to the exposure to HIV and Hepatitis C associated with unsafe drug use, and the erratic and at times violent behaviour caused by drug use. This is a problem Victorian workers have dealt with for long enough.

CONTEXT

The North Richmond and Abbotsford area is one of the most active and highly visible for heroin users and dealers. In the period between May and December in 2012, 1,550 needles were collected per month in the syringe disposal bins here. There were 8,092 syringes collected from the streets alone between May and August of 2012. Studies show that drug users come into this area to use and purchase heroin, and the rate of arrest for drug offences is 3.2 times the Victorian national average. Clearly, the Richmond area proposed for the MSIC has one of the highest concentrations of drug use in Victoria.

Reports show there is a small rectangle in North Richmond where on average, more than 20 people die from heroin overdoses each year, and 20% of all heroin overdose deaths in Victoria have either sourced their drugs from North Richmond or die there. Ambulance service data shows Yarra City Council has the highest number of ambulance attendance of heroin-related overdoses of any local government, with roughly double the rate of attendances of the Melbourne City Council. This is valuable time that our paramedics could be devoting towards other health crises.
STATEMENT OF SUPPORT

VTHC supports the proposed MSIC in the North Richmond area. These facilities have been used in cities such as Sydney and Vancouver, and throughout Europe. They have adopted an evidence-based approach to tackling issues related to drug use, and their policies are informed by a harm minimisation framework. These cities have identified that drug use, and the fallouts of drug use, such as public injecting, overdoses, and littering of paraphernalia is a problem and have worked to reduce this.

Analysis of the Kings Cross MSIC shows that the cost of running the facility is around $3 million; equivalent to the average cost of keeping 45 prisoners in jail, or 150 people in residential rehabilitation centre.\textsuperscript{xvi} The studies show the savings are greater than the costs and come through the prevention of the spread of Hepatitis C and HIV, the reduction in costs of ambulance call outs for drug overdose, and prevention of hospital costs.

The Kings Cross MSIC has overseen more than 15,000 people use their services.\textsuperscript{xvii} They have facilitated 965,000 injections, and made more than 12,000 referrals to health, drug treatment, social and welfare services. They have overseen more than 6,000 overdoses without a single death.

The structure of MSIC’s means there are nurses and health experts there to treat patients, and respond to potential overdoses. They advise about hygiene, safety and harm minimisation, and refer clients on to specialised services. These services are necessary to prevent harm associated with drug use; the Kings Cross facility found 70% of clients had never accessed any local health service before, but over 80% of frequent clients ultimately accept some form of referral for addiction treatment. Further, ambulance call-outs to Kings Cross have decreased by 80%.\textsuperscript{xv}

The worth of this proposed facility is not only founded in the likely financial savings, but more importantly in valuing and dignifying the lives of all Victorians, including those who use drugs.

The International Drug Policy Consortium has found that the outcomes produced in Sydney are not a once off. The results of the Vancouver MSIC were so convincing that the Canadian Supreme Court ruled that shutting the facility would violate a human right. Since 2003, the Vancouver MSIC has overseen on average 587 injections daily, and provided 5,268 referrals to social and health services.\textsuperscript{xvii} It improved the public order for nearby areas, including reducing overdose deaths in the surrounding neighbourhoods by 36% in the two years after opening.\textsuperscript{xv}

These results are also repeated throughout Europe.\textsuperscript{xvii}

VTHC does not believe that a MSIC would increase crime in the facility’s area. In fact, the results from Kings Cross and around the world show that drug-related crimes remain stagnant or decreases in MSIC areas.\textsuperscript{xvii}

CONCLUDING STATEMENTS

VTHC believes the proposed changes will make it safer for paramedics, and all workers across Victoria, as they would spend less time attending drug overdoses in North Richmond. The
proposed changes would also make it safer for drug users in the area. Not only would a MSIC prevent deaths, but it would positively impact the area by reducing public drug taking, and drug-related litter. It is in this vein that we fully support the proposed injecting centre, and urge the committee to fully endorse the bill.
ENDNOTES


Let's start saving lives

We, the undersigned, support a trial of a Medically Supervised Injection Centre in Victoria.

WE ARE SURE this will save lives - let's remember while there's life, there's hope.

We call upon the Members of the Victorian Parliament to support a rigorously evaluated trial in Richmond, the epicentre of Melbourne's crisis with heroin, other opioids, and other street drugs including methamphetamine.

There have not been any deaths from a drug overdose in any of the 20 Medically Supervised Injection Centres operating in the world. The first opened in 1998.

There were 172 heroin-related overdose deaths in Victoria in 2016. Of these, 19 people died in North Richmond and a further 15 died after apparently obtaining heroin in the City of Yarra. Despite the best efforts of current services, people are still dying preventable deaths. Each of those drug overdose deaths was preventable. North Richmond needle exchange distributes 70,000 syringes each month, if those people had instead injected drugs in a supervised facility, possibly none would have died from a drug overdose.

A Medically Supervised Injection Centre was opened in Kings Cross, Sydney in 2001. After one million injections, there have been 6,500 drug overdoses but no one has died. Treating a facility would help some of Melbourne's most vulnerable. It would introduce them to health and social services including drug treatment, and will help some get their lives back on track.

Today people inject drugs on streets, in car parks, doorways, laneways and toilets. Many are homeless, have severe physical and mental health problems, are very isolated, while some are imprisoned and estranged from their families.

Providing a Medically Supervised Injection Centre also helps residents and businesses in some of our more troubled neighbourhoods by improving amenity. It will also reduce pressure on police, ambulance services and emergency departments in hospitals.

Leading health and medical organisations, Yarra Council and most residents in the proposed trial area support a trial. According to the most recent National Drug Strategy Household Survey, a majority of Australians also favour this type of facility.

The Parliament of Victoria should not delay.

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