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CHIEF PROVINCIAL PUBLIC HEALTH OFFICER POSITION STATEMENT:

HARM REDUCTION

Harm Reduction is a proven public health approach that reduces the adverse health, social and economic outcomes related to a variety of risk associated activities. Harm reduction reduces harm to the individual, to families, and to the broader community.

What is Harm Reduction?

Harm Reduction most commonly refers to *“policies, programs and practices that aim to reduce the negative health, social and economic consequences that may ensue from the use of legal and illegal psychoactive drugs, without necessarily reducing drug use. Its cornerstones are public health, human rights and social justice”*.¹ In recent years, this approach has also been applied to reducing negative health outcomes that are associated with sexual activity. Examples of harm reduction services include:

- needle distribution/recovery
- opioid replacement (eg. methadone)
- overdose antidote provision (eg. naloxone)
- safer sex supply distribution (eg. condoms)
- outreach/education programs

There will always be activities associated with risk in our society. The central focus of a harm reduction approach is on supporting people’s efforts to minimize negative health and social outcomes. For example, ensuring access to sterile needles and overdose reversal medications does not eliminate drug use, but does reduce the risk for blood-borne pathogens and drug-related injury. The same can be said for harm reduction approaches that are geared towards reducing the sexual transmission of infections, such as access to safer sex supplies.

Harm reduction promotes health for the individual, and advocates for broader health and social policy change. It does not condone or condemn any particular behaviour. While the historical roots of harm reduction are in the area of substance use, these principles are used in many different contexts. For example, seat belts reduce the harms of driving collisions, and sunscreens reduce the harms from sun exposure.

Harm reduction approaches attempt to maintain human dignity. They are designed to be non-judgmental, pragmatic and compassionate (“come as you are”). Harm reduction does not work in isolation. It requires an integrated, cross-sectoral approach to ensure a continuum of care and support for individuals, their families, and their communities.

Impacts of Harm Reduction

Among the benefits of harm reduction are:

- reduced HIV and hepatitis C transmission
- reduced overdose death and injury
- reduced crime
- increased knowledge

In addition to benefits such as reductions in overdose deaths and blood-borne pathogen transmission, harm reduction promotes entry into addiction treatment and collaboration with community partners. Incorporating a harm reduction approach can also help to reduce the potential for harm when substance use and sexual activity are combined.

Harm reduction addresses health inequity by engaging with marginalized clients that have traditionally been difficult to reach through conventional health care programming. Drug and sex related harms are not experienced equally across all populations. Populations that already experience broad, systemic inequalities also tend to experience a greater burden of these harms. By bringing together appropriate community services and working towards structural and policy change, the needs of those who are underserved can be addressed effectively to achieve optimal care, reduce gaps in services, and improve health and well-being.

The Chief Provincial Public Health Officer affirms that:

- **There are substantial health and social harms associated with psychoactive substance use. Psychoactive substances are often used for coping with physical and/or emotional pain.**
- **There are many health, social and economic benefits when harm reduction principles are applied.**
- **Harm reduction approaches are evidence-informed and cost effective.**
- **Reducing stigma and discrimination, addressing policies that create unintended harms, and raising public awareness are all important components of a successful harm reduction program. Punitive responses to psychoactive substance use often exacerbate drug related harms.**

ⁱ Canadian Harm Reduction Network <http://canadianharmreduction.com>