

## September 2022

### MESSAGE FROM VCH LEADERSHIP



Dr. Dean Chittock  
Vice President, Medicine,  
Quality and Safety

It has been more than seven years since the province declared a public health emergency due to the opioid-related overdose deaths.

Tragically, the number of lives lost due to drug toxicity has only continued to rise dramatically. There was a 27.5 percent increase in the number of deaths in 2021 compared to 2020 in British Columbia (B.C.); 625 lives were lost in our region, which has the second largest concentration of people at risk.

Our teams of dedicated, multidisciplinary health care workers are responding to the highest rate of overdose deaths in B.C. with some of the most progressive care, treatment and harm reductions strategies. Despite this wrap-around, comprehensive approach, the magnitude of this epidemic feels boundless.

The opioid crisis is often associated with vulnerable populations who live in the Downtown Eastside, but we know this epidemic extends well across our region and residents. For instance, our region's community hospitals are admitting patients with substance use disorders who have blue and white-collar careers and have stable homes. Addiction does not discriminate; it can affect anyone. It is not a choice that people make, but rather, a disease that they succumb to.

And therein lies the biggest challenge in overcoming this epidemic. Treating mental health, substance use and addictions is complex, pervasive and multi-faceted. There is no standard practice or algorithm to guide us through the uncertainties and barriers. We must keep learning, adapting, delivering appropriate, respectful safe care and supporting each other.

In case you missed it, Dr. Rupinder Brar, Medical Director, VCH Regional Addiction Program, shared what we can each do to support these patient populations and each other in this work at last week's VCH medical staff forum; [Listen to the recording](#). As well, read the below about stories that highlight the great work of your colleagues.

You have been responding to this epidemic all the while navigating the global COVID-19 health pandemic. We see your commitment and dedication to those you care for and recognize that working tirelessly for others can take a toll on your own health too.

While not always easy in a complex health system that needs to improve, at an individual level it is important that you take excellent care of yourself, just as you do for your patients and clients. Below are resources to support your mental health and well-being, and if you or a colleague is struggling, please seek help right away.



Dr. Chad Kim Sing  
Associate Vice President,  
Medicine, Quality and Safety

### IN THE SPOTLIGHT

#### Nurse practitioners provide life-altering treatment during opioid crisis

Health care workers across B.C. have worked tirelessly as toxic street drugs continue to ravage communities and nurse practitioners (NPs) are among those making a crucial impact.

One of said NPs, Sherry Katz, has seen the effects of the opioid crisis firsthand, as she prescribes opioid agonist treatment (OAT) to vulnerable populations dealing with addiction.

Sherry, who works at Anne Vogel Clinic in Richmond, says she jumped at the opportunity to prescribe OAT when it first became available for NPs in B.C. in 2018.

"This work is truly my passion," says Sherry. "So as soon as NPs were granted prescription authorization, I did the training right away and began prescribing OAT."

She has spent her entire career working with vulnerable populations, both as a nurse and a NP, and says OAT often leads to a positive shift in behaviour, and most importantly, saves lives.

[Read the full story.](#)

### NEWS

#### Making communities SAFER in the fight against toxic street drugs

The continued rise in overdose deaths from toxic drugs in B.C. has prompted the development of innovative programs in an attempt to save lives.

The Safer Alternative for Emergency Response (SAFER) program—a collaboration between VCH, PHS Community Services Society and the BC Centre on Substance Use—provides a flexible and low-barrier supply of pharmaceutical-grade opioids to those in greatest need.

The program, which officially launched in March 2022, supplies a safer, regulated alternative to toxic street drugs for up to 200 eligible clients each year. Dr. Mark Lysyshyn, Deputy Chief Medical Health Officer, VCH, says SAFER will help save lives as the province deals with this ongoing public health emergency.

"This innovative and evidence generating program integrates harm reduction, addiction medicine, public health and social services to help those at greatest risk of dying from an overdose," says Dr. Lysyshyn.

[Read the full story.](#)

#### Improving delivery of care for patients with substance use disorders

The grip of substance use on our society is only strengthening, with one in five Canadians now meeting criteria for the diagnosis of a substance use disorder at some point during their lifetime. More people are developing downstream health consequences as a result, leading to increased emergency department (ED) visits.

This grim conundrum piqued the curiosity of Dr. Ashley Smith, a consultant physician at Vancouver General Hospital (VGH), who spearheaded a Physician Quality Improvement project aimed at increasing access to addiction medicine specialist care, and in turn, improving care delivery in the ED.

Dr. Smith, who works in the Complex Pain and Addiction Service (CPAS) at VGH, says she relishes the opportunity to help people with substance use disorders.

"I find it rewarding to work with individuals dealing with substance use issues, as it combines many aspects of medicine – pharmacology and toxicology, population health and psychiatry, to name a few," says Dr. Smith.

[Read the full story](#)

#### Take-home fentanyl test strips prove useful as low-barrier drug checking approach

A B.C.-led research study compared fentanyl detection rates using take home test strips with those tested by trained staff at harm reduction sites.

[Read more about the study.](#)

#### Innovative washroom system aims to keep clients safe

A first-of-its-kind in the region, a site implemented new procedure to help ensure clients remain safe in a washroom.

[Read more on oneVCH.](#)

#### Preparation for changes to Medical Assistance in Dying eligibility in 2023

In March 2023, patients with a sole underlying diagnosis of a mental illness will be able to apply for, and where eligible, receive Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD). This is one of the key changes from the passing of [Bill C-7 by the Canadian Federal Government](#) in March 2021. The Bill aims to balance the autonomy of individuals who are eligible to receive MAiD with the protection of vulnerable individuals who are seeking information to address their intolerable suffering.

VCH's [Assisted Dying Program](#) (ADP) and Regional Mental Health and Substance Use (RMHSU) Program are collaborating to ensure that VCH staff and medical staff receive accurate and consistent information about the coming changes related to individuals with a sole diagnosis of mental illness.

This includes creating an education plan, leadership engagement strategy and resources for staff and health service users and their families. This is with consultation and strategic direction provided by medical and operational leadership from RMHSU and ADP, representation from Indigenous Health, VCH Ethics, Legal, Client Relations and Risk Management, as well as a member with lived/living experience with mental health issues and psychiatric care within our system. In addition to these regional efforts, VCH MHSU operational and medical leadership are part of the provincial MHSU/MAiD subcommittee that brings together leadership from each health authority and several ministries.

VCH recognizes that there are questions and concerns about this legislation and its potential implications. Medical staff are encouraged to participate in dialogue with committee members or regional leaders, in upcoming MAiD roundtable discussions planned for fall 2022, or with one-on-one conversations and support any time by contacting: [Laurel Plewes, Director, ADP](#) or [Andrew MacFarlane, Regional Director, RMHSU](#).

VCH is committed to supporting medical staff through this process and to providing safe, appropriate, timely access to clients who choose the care option of MAiD.

#### Update: Mental Health Act

B.C.'s [Mental Health Act \(MHA\)](#) mandates the involuntary admission and treatment of individuals with serious mental health concerns to protect themselves and/or others. As involuntary admissions involve an extraordinary use of power, procedural safeguards are established and maintained through the timely completion of [MHA Forms](#).

While the recent Ombudsperson's investigative report identified progress in MHA compliance since the release of the [Committed to Change](#) report in 2019, there remain ongoing challenges with Form completion and quality. To support MHA education, all medical staff who admit and/or treat under the MHA are required to complete the [BC Mental Health Act](#) course within one month of hire, and every two years thereafter. For questions about the training, please contact [Maja Kolar](#).

### RESOURCES: MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE

#### For medical staff to live well and healthy

##### VCH Physician Peer Support Program

VCH offers informal peer support to physicians experiencing a difficult time. Physicians can connect with a physician peer for support and guidance that is empathetic, safe, confidential, one-to-one, short-term, and at no cost. [Learn more.](#)

##### Physician Health Program (PHP)

The PHP is a responsive, high quality care provider and community services navigator for physicians, trainees and their families. They offer 24-hour intake and a crisis support line operated in partnership with Lifeworks. It is not an emergency care provider but can facilitate access to emergency care, if required. [Learn more.](#)

##### Lifeworks Digital Platform

Provided by VCH, the platform gives access to personalized wellness resources. The digital wellness resources are available 24/7 from anywhere on mobile or web at no cost to medical staff. The platform offers expert-led online audio, video and article content, as well as assessments, toolkits and programs on topics such as family, health, life, money and work. Look for an email with an invitation and unique code for details, or contact [VCH Medical Staff](#).

#### For medical staff in the provision of patient care

##### VCH Mental Health and Substance Use Education Portal

The [online portal](#) offers medical staff access to a wide range of MHSU education, evidence-based resources and VCH policies and practice guidelines for healthcare practice settings.

##### Tertiary Mental Health and Substance Use Services

VCH offers specialized, inpatient mental health services for individuals who are experiencing acute and complex mental illness. The goal of tertiary care is to help people achieve a level of wellness that will allow them to continue their recovery in a community setting. [Learn more.](#)

##### BC ECHO for Post-COVID-19 Recovery

This free virtual learning community, which ran from July 2021 to July 2022, presented specialists and community health care providers with support and resources to care for patients experiencing symptoms after COVID-19 infection. [Learn more.](#)

##### Families in Recovery (FIR) Program – BC Women's Hospital + Health Centre

This unique program provides specialized services for women using substances and infants exposed to these substances. A multidisciplinary team provides care and support to women throughout their pregnancy, and afterwards, to help with the transition back to the community. [Learn more.](#)

##### Rapid Access to Consultative Expertise (RACE)

RACE is an innovative tool that providers can use to speak directly with a specialist, and ultimately, to enhance patient care. The RACE line offers timely guidance and advice for patients who may not require, or benefit from, a face-to-face consultation or referral to an emergency department. [Learn more.](#)

### UPCOMING EVENTS & TRAINING

#### Webinar: Indigenous Patient Experience in Health Care: October 28

Hosted by VCH Indigenous Health and UBC iCON, this next Indigenous Health Round will have Elder Xwechtaal Dennis Joseph and Lori Quinn join us in circle to share their knowledge on Indigenous patient experience in health care. [Learn more and register.](#)

#### VCH Medical Staff Forum: December 15

Join us for a presentation on the latest Health Human Resources (HHR) and Wellness status updates at VCH, including staffing challenges and wellness resources and initiatives for medical staff (Guest speaker TBC). There will also be a COVID-19 update and live Q&A session. [Register here.](#)

#### OAT Training Program for physicians and nurse practitioners

VCH and the BC Centre on Substance Use are offering VCH medical staff funded training opportunities that can build provider capacity and skill sets for prescribing opioid agonist therapy. To date, over 200 VCH healthcare providers have completed the funded OAT training. [Learn more.](#)

#### Communicating Unexpected Outcomes Disclosure Training Course

Conversations about unexpected outcomes and disclosing errors can be difficult. To support medical staff, VCH offers a training course that can enhance the communication skills for disclosing clinical errors with honesty, empathy and respect. Participants will also learn to improve their support of team members. This four-hour course is delivered in-person and online, is at no cost to medical staff and eligible for continuing education credits. [Learn more and register for upcoming sessions on the LearningHub.](#)

[Find more opportunities.](#)

### IN CASE YOU MISSED IT: MEDICAL STAFF FEATURED ON ONEVCH

#### Celebrating Pride

A four-part series about inclusivity and belonging features lived experiences of VCH medical staff from the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. [Read their stories.](#)

#### Quality improvement projects lead to enhanced health care outcomes

Physician-Led Quality Improvement program graduates celebrated another successful completion of QI projects. [Read the full story.](#)

#### VCH women of distinction 2022

Celebrating VCH women leaders who received awards and recognition for making a difference in health care including nurse practitioners Leah Christoff and Lana Moroz and physicians Andrea MacNeill and Elizabeth Bryce. [Read the full story.](#)

#### From sports to science and medicine; it's all an art of precision

B.C. has one physician who is fully specialized providing services in male infertility and sexual medicine practices, and he practices right here with us. [Meet Dr. Ryan Flannigan.](#)

### GET INVOLVED

#### Submit a provincial Health Technology Assessment Committee (HTAC) topic nomination

HTAC is looking for submissions to inform its 2023/2024 work plan.

The process provides evidence-informed advice about which devices, diagnostics, medical procedures, or programs should receive funding in the province. Some examples of recently assessed topics include neuromodulation for cancer and non-cancer pain and deep brain stimulation for advanced Parkinson's disease.

If you are aware of any health technologies that are not publicly funded that would significantly contribute to improved patient outcomes and provide value for money, or health technologies that are currently funded within the system but whose benefits may no longer be clear, please complete the [HTA Topic Nomination Form](#) and send it via email to the Health Technology Assessment Office ([Office@gov.bc.ca](mailto:Office@gov.bc.ca)) before Nov. 18 in order to be considered.

For assistance in completing the nomination form, contact [Rachael Ritchie](#) or [click here](#).

### DID YOU KNOW?

#### In case you missed it: September Medical Staff Forum

On September 21, 2022, the medical staff forum focused on mental health and substance use, and COVID-19 updates. Here are the [slides](#), [important links](#) and [video recording](#).

#### Update: important staff website

Thank you to everyone who participated in a focus group, interview and/or the survey to provide input on the medical staff website. Your feedback is greatly appreciated and will influence changes to the website project, which we are currently in the second phase of planning. [Read the full report of findings](#). Congratulations to the winner of the prize draw, Dr. Nicola Hahn, for winning a pair of AirPods Pro!

#### Update: VCH COVID-19 Slack Site

Launched in early 2020 as a team messaging service, the VCH COVID-19 Slack Site enabled VCH medical staff to receive timely COVID-19 information, to ask questions, hold discussions and support one another in a dedicated space. As the site usage has significantly decreased, it will be decommissioned on October 15th, 2022. We thank you for your participation that made this site a success.

#### Health Authority Medical Advisory Committee (HAMAC) Highlights

HAMAC hosted its first of two educational workshops this year. The workshop was to help medical leaders understand stigma to enable them to improve the system of care, as well to dialogue on social and structural stigma with a focus on mental health and substance use. [Read the July 2022 HAMAC Highlights](#).

#### College of Physicians and Surgeons ICS Anti-Racism

This resource helps explain how the College expects physicians and surgeons to incorporate Indigenous cultural safety, cultural humility and anti-racism into their practice. [Learn more.](#)

[Meet the VCH Medical Staff Editorial Board.](#)

VCH is strongly committed to diversity within its community and especially welcomes input from racialized persons / persons of colour, women, Indigenous / Aboriginal People of North America, persons with disabilities, 2SLGBTQIA+ and others who may contribute to the further diversification of ideas.