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New treatment option brings hope for those with significant opioid addiction

KELOWNA - As part of its response to the ongoing overdose crisis, Interior Health has introduced a new evidence-based treatment option for those with severe opioid addiction.

Injectable Opioid Agonist Treatment, or iOAT, is now available through a clinic in Kelowna's Community Health Services Centre on Doyle Avenue.

People with opioid use disorder are physically dependent on opioids - they experience serious withdrawal symptoms without opioids.

Oral OAT is an evidence-based treatment that uses medications like methadone and Suboxone to manage withdrawal symptoms. It helps with cravings and prevents overdoses. It also provides a regular connection with a health-care team, including physicians, nurses, pharmacists, and social program officers, which can help with overall stabilization. While oral OAT is an effective treatment for many people with opioid use disorder, it does not work for everyone. Injectable OAT offers an evidence-based alternative that has long been recognized as a successful second line of treatment for opioid use disorder. It has been available in Vancouver since 2012 and in Fraser Health since 2018.

"Everyone deserves to be supported in finding their own unique pathway to hope and a pathway to healing. For some people that includes medication-assisted treatments like iOAT," said Mental Health and Addictions Minister Judy Darcy. "Adding this life-saving treatment option in Kelowna, means more people will be able to find the help they need when they need it."

One client who had been anxiously awaiting iOAT in Kelowna and has consistently attended the clinic every day since it opened says that after one month, he has discovered "hope for the future".

"I am able to walk down the street with less anxiety, and what is bigger is that I look back at my life and have empathy for the people that have struggled and experienced pain because of my choices to do what I have had to do just to feel normal. I see so many ways that this can benefit people... and that makes me excited that I can participate in life and think about volunteering and working and that my focus is not solely about how to get my next 'fix' just to cope with being alive."

Through engagement in this program, this client has felt empowered by his success in changing his routine and advocating for the health of people who use drugs, proving to himself that he can take on more responsibilities.

"I wish that this program was available 10 years ago, because knowing how I am feeling now, I think I could have gone back to school, I could be working full time, I could have even been in a relationship, and less people would have suffered because of me doing what I needed to do just to feel normal," he says.

The iOAT service augments the oral Opioid Agonist Treatment clinic, which recently expanded to provide walk-in, same day access to physicians, nurses and social program officers as well as weekend and evening hours. Services also include support around substance use, mental health, harm reduction, access to primary care, and psychosocial supports.

“This is a safe approach for those who have not had success with other treatment options,” says Interior Health Board Chair Doug Cochrane. “Treatment options available at the clinic in the Community Health Services Center help people stabilize physically, while offering the opportunity for staff to engage with clients, providing important service referrals and connections for treatment. These services offer hope to people who otherwise feel hopeless.”

Increased access to Opioid Agonist Treatment is one aspect of Interior Health’s overdose crisis response. Other elements include enhanced surveillance to better track overdoses; participation in the BC Take Home Naloxone program; expanded Mental Health and Substance Use treatment programs like Intensive Day Treatment; and assertive outreach and follow-up efforts.

For more information visit www.interiorhealth.ca.

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Photo caption: Members of the iOAT team at the new clinic in Kelowna.