



Making the Best of it: Ethics & Harm Reduction

“It’s hard for, especially street people and junkies, to find somebody who will be sympathetic, and not be judged by just the fact that you’re doing drugs”

-Insite client

Harm reduction is a relatively new approach in health care. There are debates regarding how to define harm reduction and what fits in the category, but in general harm reduction approaches aim to reduce the negative consequences of a particular activity, such as injection drug use, without requiring abstinence. Harm reduction recognizes that some degree of high-risk activity is inevitable, and its goal is therefore reducing the negative outcomes of such activity.

Harm reduction addresses risky behavior in a way that preserves dignity of and respect for individuals engaged in those activities. In Canada, examples of organizations taking a harm reduction approach include insite in Vancouver, Street Works in Edmonton, and the Toronto Raver Info Project (TRIP!).

Harm reduction can include prescription methadone and heroin, server intervention programs, limiting tobacco use, needle exchanges, safe injection sites, safer sex campaigns, “wet” shelters, safer rave programs, decriminalization of certain drugs, and condom distribution in high schools. Harm reduction programs meet clients where they’re at and work with clients to determine appropriate short and long term goals. They also involve individuals from communities affected by high-risk activity as collaborators in program design.

Harm reduction is sometimes described as value-neutral, in the sense that it does not take a position on or judge the morality of behavior such as drug use or sex work. It is not, however, value-neutral in the sense of there being no value-based reasons to adopt such an approach. In what follows I will identify some of the reasons why there are good, ethical reasons to include harm reduction approaches in an overall health strategy.

One of the most significant benefits of harm reduction approaches is the development of long-term, trusting and respectful relationships between clients and staff. These relationships serve to support the development of capacity for autonomy, increase the self-worth of clients, and most importantly, express fundamental respect for clients.

Harm reduction furthermore reflects respect for individual autonomy and individual responsibility by understanding engaging in risky behavior as a choice but not necessarily a sign of individual deviance, immorality, or illness. It also recognizes that high-risk behavior might be an appropriate response to a complex situation.

Harm reduction, through reducing the negative consequences of behavior like sex work, leads to better short-term health outcomes for individuals by, for example, reducing infection rates. Harm reduction can also lead to better long-term health outcomes by giving individuals access health care that they might not have otherwise. Harm reduction programs often result in better outcomes for communities that are impacted by illicit activities by reducing the spread of disease in a community as well as reducing violence and crime associated with illicit activities.



“I think it’s better for everybody, actually - not only for the people who are using the place, but for the community.”

-Insite client

Harm reduction programs, like other health promotion strategies, are often a more efficient use of health care resources than addressing overdoses, infections, disease, and undesired pregnancy after they have occurred.

Finally, harm reduction programs often target marginalized populations and treat them with respect, reflecting a commitment to social justice and ensuring that the program does not contribute to the further marginalization of these groups.

This is not to say that there are no ethical challenges in adopting a harm reduction strategy. Particular issues include questions about the degree to which addiction restricts capacities for autonomy, the weight of social interests in expressing disapproval of certain types of behaviors, and the potential impact of programs that might appear to condone behaviors and practices that are illegal and it is important for harm reduction strategies to address these challenges.

Nonetheless, the weight of the ethical argument provides support for adopting harm reduction as a preferred way of addressing high-risk behaviors. Harm reduction approaches are consistent with ethical commitments to respecting individuals, achieving good outcomes for both communities and individuals, using scarce health resources effectively, and working toward social justice.

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NSHEN: Coming Events...

September 29, 2010
12:00 - 1:00 pm

Telehealth Education Session
Topic: “Public Health Ethics”

Please check with your telehealth coordinator for your local room location details.

October 27, 2010

Public Presentation: “Ethics in the Community”
Antigonish, NS. *Stay tuned for more details!*

October 28, 2010

Staff & Physician Presentation: “Ethics & Obesity”
Antigonish, NS. *Stay tuned for more details!*

October 29, 2010

Staff Presentation: “Ethics & the Aging Population”
Sydney NS. *Stay tuned for more details!*

November 17, 2010

Staff Presentation: “Ethics & Disclosure”
Amherst, NS.

Questions? Comments? Want to join the mail list?

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