



## HEALTH OFFICERS COUNCIL OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

*Dr. Marcus Lem, Chair*  
*c/o NI Medical Health Office*  
*355 11<sup>th</sup> St. Courtenay B.C. V9N 1S4*  
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The Honourable John Horgan  
Premier of British Columbia  
By email to: [premier@gov.bc.ca](mailto:premier@gov.bc.ca)

November 21, 2017

Dear Premier Horgan,

Thank you for your attention to the ongoing epidemic of opioid overdoses/poisonings and the appointment of the Minister of Mental Health and Addictions to lead the development of a response.

The Health Officers Council (HOC) of British Columbia<sup>1</sup> worked with the Provincial Health Officer to draw attention to this crisis and we continue to be concerned by the unprecedented numbers of fatalities. Our membership has a critical role in helping address this Public Health emergency and HOC has developed a discussion paper with concrete recommendations to support a coordinated, accelerated and multi-sectoral response which encompasses all levels of government and civil society.

Coordinated action will be needed across most BC Government Ministries, and with your Federal, First Nations, and local counterparts. We are writing to you as the most senior government official in the province because sustained leadership at the highest levels across governments is needed to address this emergency.

The premise of the attached paper and recommendations is that opioid-related overdoses/poisonings and deaths can be prevented in the immediate and longer terms by understanding and addressing the root determinants of the emergency. The causes of this epidemic, as described in the paper, include but are not limited to:

- Toxic street drugs in which fentanyl analogues are ubiquitous and inconsistently mixed so that lethal doses are unavoidable. In 83% of recent BC overdose deaths fentanyl was detected <sup>2</sup>;
- Individuals and families with inadequate income, housing, food, employment, and social supports who are using drugs to cope with hopelessness, stress and harsh living conditions;
- Drug use as self-medication to blunt the effects of physical, emotional and sexual trauma and abuse;
- The promotion of opioid prescription and inappropriate dosing regimes by pharmaceutical companies for chronic, non-cancer pain relief, coupled with inadequate resources for mental health, problematic substance use care and non-pharmaceutical pain management;

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<sup>1</sup> The Health Officers' Council of British Columbia is a registered society of British Columbia public health physicians who, among other activities, advise and advocate for evidence based public policies and programs directed to protecting and improving the health of populations.

<sup>2</sup> BC Coroners Service. *Fentanyl-Detected Illicit Drug Overdose Deaths January 1, 2012 to September 30, 2017*. Posted November 9, 2017. <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/public-safety-and-emergency-services/death-investigation/statistical/fentanyl-detected-overdose.pdf>



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- Lack of a comprehensive treatment and recovery system to help people in need, and numerous barriers to evidence-based substance use disorder treatment, including limited access to the full spectrum of opioid agonist medications, unsafe withdrawal management practices, and lack of health professional training and education about substance use disorders and pain management.

Our recommended areas for urgent attention are based on a Public Health approach, with specific actions for the following:

1. Children and Youth Health Promotion
2. Stigma Reduction
3. Public Health Oriented Regulation of Opioids
4. Scale-up of Prevention and Harm Reduction Services, including Drug Checking
5. Establishment of an Evidence-based Treatment, Care, Recovery and Rehabilitation System
6. Improvement of Pain Management Services and Education
7. Modernization of Organizational Policies
8. Enhancement of Monitoring, Evaluation and Research.

We need to bring this situation under control as quickly as possible and this cannot become the new normal.

The costs to our society are enormous in term of the physical and mental damage, crime, violence, policing, courts, correctional services, ambulances, emergency department visits, hospitalizations, long term care, and lost human potential. We can pay for it now or we can pay for it later.

We recognize the leadership of the BC Government and also strongly urge you to petition your Federal, Provincial and Territorial counterparts to form a national structure so that we can obtain expert consensus across Canada on how to deal with the crisis. We hope that our advice on addressing the determinants of this epidemic are seriously considered and we are willing to assist in any way to support a rapid response to this tragic loss of life. Please feel free to contact me if you require any further information.

Sincerely,

Marcus Lem, MD, MHSc, FRCPC  
Chair

Enclosure