
NEWS RELEASE

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Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General
BC Coroners Service

Expert panel urges safer supply, evidence-based system of care to reduce deaths from illicit drugs

VICTORIA – A panel of subject-matter experts convened by the BC Coroners Service is calling for increased access to a safer supply of drugs and creation of an evidence-based continuum of care to better support substance users and reduce the number of illicit drug-related deaths in B.C.

The recommendations are included in a report examining the circumstances around 6,007 deaths from illicit drug toxicity between Aug. 1, 2017 and July 31, 2021. The report BC Coroners Service Death Review Panel: A Review of Illicit Drug Toxicity Deaths reveals that the primary cause of these deaths was the increasingly toxic and unpredictable illicit drug supply in the province, and that the current drug policy framework of prohibition is forcing substance users to access the unregulated market, leading to increased numbers of substance-related emergencies and deaths.

Illicit drug toxicity is the leading cause of unnatural death in B.C., accounting for more deaths than homicides, suicides, motor vehicle incidents, drownings and fire-related deaths combined.

“This report includes realistic, actionable recommendations that the panel believes will reduce the number of people dying due to toxic, illicit drugs in our province,” said Michael Egilson, death review panel chair. “We recognize that many of the timelines in the report are aggressive, but COVID-19 has demonstrated how swiftly policy-makers can act when lives are at stake – and we know that every month of inaction equates to hundreds more lives lost.”

The panel’s advice to the chief coroner included three recommendations:

1. Ensure a safer drug supply to those at risk of dying from the toxic illicit drug supply
2. Develop a 30/60/90-day Illicit Drug Toxicity Action Plan with ongoing monitoring
3. Establish an evidence-based continuum of care

The chief coroner has forwarded each of the panel’s recommendations to the relevant ministries and organizations.

Members of the panel were appointed by the chief coroner under Section 49 of the Coroners Act and included professionals with expertise in public health, health services, substance use and addiction, medicine, mental health, Indigenous health, education, income assistance, oversight and regulation, and policing. Regardless of their employment or other affiliations, individual panel members were asked to exercise their mandate under the Coroners Act and express their personal knowledge and professional expertise.

“I want to thank all of the panel members for their expertise and their shared commitment to

preventing deaths from the toxic illicit drug supply,” said Lisa Lapointe, chief coroner. “We know that everyone who dies because of drug toxicity leaves behind family, friends and communities who grieve their loss. As we approach the sixth anniversary of the declaration of the public-health emergency into substance-related harms, co-ordinated, urgent action is needed to reduce the devastation illicit drugs have inflicted on so many people in our province. This report, by a panel of subject-matter experts, provides a roadmap. It is my sincere hope that their advice will be actioned.”

Findings reviewed by the panel show:

- deaths are increasing both in number and in rate;
- the drug supply has become increasingly toxic;
- more drug toxicity deaths occur among younger adults – the average age of death is 42;
- illicit drug toxicity deaths are ranked second after cancers for potential years of life lost;
- Indigenous Peoples are disproportionately represented in drug toxicity fatalities;
- individuals living in poverty and with housing instability are more vulnerable;
- people with mental health disorders or poor mental health are disproportionately represented;
- in addition to fentanyl, other substances were also detected in most deaths;
- people had frequently accessed medical services prior to an illicit-drug-related death;
- deaths are occurring throughout the province;
- while the highest number of deaths occur in large urban centres (Vancouver, Surrey, Victoria), this issue spans beyond urban areas; and
- smoking is the most common method of illicit drug consumption.

Learn More:

BC Coroners Service Death Review Panel: A Review of Illicit Drug Toxicity Deaths – Released March 9, 2022: https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/death-review-panel/review_of_illicit_drug_toxicity_deaths_2022.pdf

BC Coroners Service Death Review Panel: A Review of Illicit Drug Overdoses – Released April 5, 2018: https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/birth-adoption-death-marriage-and-divorce/deaths/coroners-service/death-review-panel/bccs_illicit_drug_overdose_drp_report.pdf

Death Review Panel: <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/life-events/death/coroners-service/death-review-panel>

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