

Volatile Substance Misuse: A Look Into the Future

Dear Editor:

The misuse of volatile substances, such as gasoline, glue and paint thinner, among First Nations youth has re-emerged in the Canadian media recently.¹ Public awareness was initially raised in 1993 with a widely-played news clip of Innu youth in Davis Inlet, Newfoundland getting high by sniffing gasoline. In 1996, a major response was undertaken by Health Canada's First Nations and Inuit Health Branch in partnership with First Nations, and 11 treatment centres were developed across the country to treat volatile substance misuse (VSM). Today, Canada is recognized as an international leader in its residential treatment of youth misusing volatile substances.

This is not, however, the complete Canadian story. While we know that VSM is a worldwide concern, we know relatively little about misuse among non-marginalized populations.²⁻⁵ As part of a recent delegation to the International Forum on Inhalants in Mexico City, Canada shared its residential treatment expertise alongside an update on the global state of VSM, drawing from co-editorship of a special issue of *Substance Use and Misuse* with the United States and Australia. This work, combined with the Forum discussion, raised two key considerations that have the potential (if addressed) to positively influence Canada's unfolding story.

First, volatile substances are among the first drugs of choice by youth due to their accessibility and it appears that there is increased use among girls. In the US, for example, the 2002-2005 National Household Survey on Drug Use and Health reported a 4.1% increase in use among girls between the ages of 12 and 17.⁶ The reason for the increase is not entirely clear, but insight may be gained from increases in other "legal" drug use among females, such as alcohol and prescription medication. International studies, for example, have concluded that lower societal stigma associated with the misuse of "legal" products can lead to increased willingness by females to use them.^{7,8}

Second, evidence has emerged from Mexico that solvents are starting to be "marketed", with the addition of appealing odorants such as cinnamon or coconut. The multi-sector impact of the introduction of volatile substances into the "illegal" drug market is unknown; though, again, insight may be gained from drug distribution that is currently directed toward youth, such as synthetic drug marketing techniques that attune to the substances' "legal"

status. A recent European study associated the marketing of designer drugs and availability via the internet with youth use.⁹ Once again, there may be a gendered make-up to this.

Canada has laudable experience with treatment as well as prevention of VSM among First Nations youth. At the same time, there is an urgent need for Canada to collect quantitative VSM data on its national household drug survey and provincial school surveys. It is also imperative that qualitative studies of VSM's etiology and consequences among all youth be undertaken to empirically inform targeted health promotion and prevention efforts. Such action may contribute to a positive ending in Canada's story.

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