

# THE FREE PRESS UP FRONT

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PHONE 564-0005

## Clinic saving taxpayers money

*Workers say methadone service is working as it celebrates first anniversary*

By CHRISTIANA WIENS

Free Press staff writer

Imagine an escaped parolee so desperate for his next dose of methadone, he calls his parole officer and says come get me.

It happened here, Monday.

The unnamed parolee, missing for about a week, was panicked and drug sick for his next sip of methadone medication. The parole officer calls the Metaclic, the only methadone clinic north of Kamloops.

The call will surely mean his return to jail but, as clinic councillor Bill Leslie says, he really doesn't have much choice.

"He's going through hell right now," he says as he gets up from the parole officer's call and arranges to meet the escaped parolee and his parole officer at a local pharmacy, so he can calm down before he is locked up. The clinic carries no methadone on site.

The call is a significant description of desperation on Prince George streets for opiates — in the form of heroin or methadone — and the desperation of clinic clients to get it.

Monday was also the methadone clinic's one year anniversary.

The unnamed parolee is one of the clinic's 160 active visitors who take a prescribed dose of methadone every day at one of four city pharmacies. Many more get methadone from one of four doctors in the city registered to distribute the substance. According to a survey done when the clinic opened its doors last year, there are as many as 500 people in this region alone who inject, snort, or smoke heroin-laced cigarettes.

It also serves clients as far away as Burns Lake, Fort St. James and Dawson Creek.

Mr. Leslie estimates the average daily cost of a heroin habit at \$250 to \$400, with some habits costing as much as \$1000 per day.

Drug users will do almost anything to get that money and keep themselves from being drug sick, a process by which people begin to get escalating aches and



Staff at Prince George's methadone clinic celebrated their first anniversary on Monday. CHRISTIANA WIENS/FREE PRESS

pains, profuse sweats, nausea, diarrhea and vomiting.

"People will beg, prostitute and steal to get that money," he says.

Compare that to a 100 milligram methadone dose of \$3.50 a day and the clinic saves the community money in RCMP costs, emergency room staff and social services.

"Every dollar spent on methadone saves the government coffers \$11," says Mr. Leslie.

Methadone works by blocking the body's reaction to heroin. So a user can continue to use heroin while taking methadone but it won't necessarily get them high.

The goal is to reduce harm by stabiliz-

ing the patient's cravings, getting them back into a routine lifestyle and then eventually weaning them off methadone itself.

The drug itself is controversial, with some condemning it for being too addictive and sometimes, ineffective.

Even Dr. Ian Postnikoff, a clinic doctor, says the rate of return to heroin can be harsh. If a client has been on heroin for one year, he says, and methadone for another, there is a 90 per cent failure rate.

With the same length of heroin use and a three year involvement with methadone, 40 to 60 per cent of clients will relapse.

"Statistically, heroin is the drug

from hell, but if people take methadone seriously they can do it."

The clinic, so far, has a 75 per cent success rate and has branched out to a second clinic in Nanaimo and to a positive reinforcement campaign for cocaine users here (people get food, swim tickets and gifts, for providing drug-free urine samples).

The random samples are drawn periodically to make sure clients are actually improving and is one of the ways the clinic tracks its clients.

Since Thanksgiving weekend, when

the RCMP arrested someone selling a stolen bottle of methadone that had been prescribed by the clinic, the clinic has stopped distributing extra doses of the drug to cover long weekends when the pharmacies were closed.

The move has frustrated clinic clients who have been clean and earned their "carries," but Mr. Leslie says it's needed to control and clean up illegal use on the street. The drug's street value goes for about \$1 per milligram, and sometimes, he says, people can siphon off some of their carry and sell it on the street to get money.

If a client had proven themselves clean for at least three months, explains Mr. Leslie, the clinic sometimes allowed people to "carry" two or three days of the drug. Peoples Drug Mart downtown will now open Sundays for three hours to accommodate methadone users who will be required to take the drug in the presence of a pharmacist.

"We're real concerned about this," he says "We want to dry up this leak."

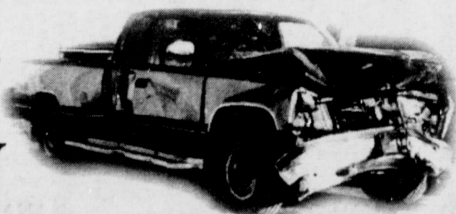


Methadone comes in powdered form and is mixed with water.

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