

Taming the beast of addiction takes effort

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Re: Ottawa gets a spanking, Jan. 15.

As expected, my decision to provide provincial government funding to distribute safe crack-inhalation kits has met with a storm of protest. This debate, which has played itself out in the Ottawa community, has allowed two wonderful expressions of society's goals for its citizens to be powerfully proclaimed. There is a common ground.

No matter the difference of opinion in tactics and strategies, collectively we mourn for the loss of our brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers and friends, people who lost their battle against a treacherous beast of an addiction: crack cocaine.

My decision was informed not only by the inspiration we all share -- for that "end state"-- where the crack user's addiction is tamed; their life transformed and hope restored, but by my own knowledge that the taming of such a beast is no easy task.

Critics argue by providing a safe crack pipe, we are enabling the addicted. The pipe is not actually an enabler for the crack to be consumed, a pop can may suffice. The safe crack pipe serves but one goal, the kind of goal a health minister is paid to consider.

For in just about the darkest corner to be found -- or better yet, not found -- stands a crack user and a health care worker talking about the goal of better health, arming them with the thing they most lack at that moment.

That sense of empowerment that comes when somebody actually cares whether your next fix is going to give you hepatitis C is that first step towards that "end state" we all want to see. Not making matters worse is the first form of treatment.

It is a treatment of compassion and empowerment. And we are giving that power to people in the hopes that they soon stand on their own -- crack-free -- whether it is in Ottawa, Oshawa or Odessa. It all starts with a conversation. A relationship emerges. Hope rises. And confidence is gained to take the next step.

Our government has been criticized for acting like Big Brother and being hypocritical, but this is not an issue about power. Rather it is one of compassion that knows no municipal boundaries.

To meet with success and slay this beast, I would ask that our compassion be sensibly channelled towards the crack user. Demands to just stop this behaviour short-change the addictive monster that is crack cocaine: it knows few equals in its capacity to wreak havoc on the lives of our loved ones.

And our government will take successive steps towards enhanced treatment options as part of improving access to quality health care for all.

George Smitherman,

Toronto

Minister of Health and Long-term Care

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