

Use of Blue Lights in Publicly-Accessible Washrooms

Background

Blue lights are sometimes installed in publicly-accessible washrooms to discourage injecting drug use. The lights are intended to visually obscure superficial veins, thereby making it difficult to inject drugs intravenously.

Recommendation

Interior Health recommends against placing blue lights in publicly-accessible washrooms.

Blue lights are unlikely to deter injecting drug use and may increase associated harms including blood borne virus transmission, injecting related injury and disease, and overdose. They may also reduce health and safety among the broader community.

Discussion

Blue lights are unlikely to prevent injecting drug use in publicly-accessible washrooms. While the lights reduce vein visibility, evidence indicates people will attempt to inject under blue lights when they feel confident in their injecting ability and where there are no suitable alternatives.

Blue lights increase risks associated with injecting drug use. They promote unsafe practices such as deep vein injecting, which can be done without visual identification of the vein. People attempting to inject under blue lights may accidentally inject into an artery or into surrounding tissue. They may have trouble measuring and monitoring the amount they are injecting, thereby increasing overdose risk. Poor visibility increases the risk of blood borne virus transmission as it is harder to see and clean up any blood or bodily fluids.

The installation of blue lights in publicly-accessible washrooms may lead to increased drug use in public places including nearby stairwells, alleys and parks. This affects perceptions of public safety, and compounds the shame experienced by many people who inject drugs.

Blue lights compromise health and safety for all washroom users as they reduce visibility, increase risk of trips and falls, make it harder to see and clean up hazardous waste, and prevent community members from carrying out basic personal hygiene, such as identifying changes in eye or skin tone, or the presence of blood or discoloration in bodily fluids.

References

Crabtree A, Mercer G, Horan R, Grant S, Tan T, Buxton JA: A qualitative study of the perceived effects of blue lights in washrooms on people who use injection drugs. *Harm Reduction Journal* 2013, 10:(22) <http://harmreductionjournal.com/content/10/1/22>

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