

UBC honours Dr. Nora Volkow for outstanding contribution to addiction research

NIDA director a strong supporter of the BC-CfE's Seek and Treat strategy to fight HIV

At a special ceremony on May 31, 2010, Dr. Nora Volkow, director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) at the National Institutes of Health, was awarded an honorary degree of Doctor of Science by the University of British Columbia (UBC).

Dr. Volkow was recognized for her relentless efforts to understand the causes and health consequences of drug addiction, her pivotal role in shaping addiction research and her life-long work of advocating for evidence-based public policy.

"I am delighted that Dr. Volkow, one of the world's most respected leaders in the area of addiction research, has accepted this honour," said Prof. Stephen Toope, president and vice-chancellor of UBC. "She has been an exemplary leader and dedicated three decades of her life towards making a difference as a researcher and as a doctor."

Dr. Volkow said that she is deeply humbled by this honour, especially as it comes from a leading education and research institution such as UBC. "Drug addiction is a devastating disease, with staggering social and economic costs. It pleases me greatly to think that through my research, I may have contributed to



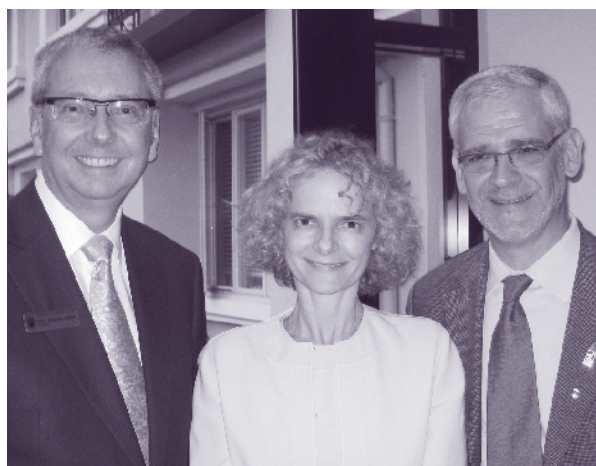
Dr. Nora Volkow, director of NIDA addresses the audience on receiving her honorary degree by UBC. Photo: Martin Dee/UBC

improving the health of individuals and communities affected by substance abuse and addiction and informing public policy," said Dr. Volkow.

In her role as NIDA director, Dr. Volkow has been very supportive of the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE) Seek and Treat for Optimal Prevention of HIV/AIDS (STOP HIV/AIDS) strategy. The strategy supports the expansion of highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) to all HIV-positive individuals who are in medical need, including hard-to-reach populations such as sex trade workers and injection drug users. Providing more HIV-positive British Columbians with HAART is a prerequisite to significantly reducing or even eliminating the spread of HIV.

A pioneer in the use of brain imaging to investigate addiction and other mental disorders, Dr. Volkow's research has been instrumental in showing that addiction is a disease of the brain, and not a sign of moral weakness or a flawed character.

She has published more than 450 peer-reviewed articles and more than 60 book chapters and non-peer reviewed manuscripts. In 2007, she was named one of *TIME* magazine's "Top 100 People Who Shape Our World."



Dr. Nora Volkow (centre), director of NIDA with Prof. Stephen Toope (left), president and vice-chancellor of UBC and Dr. Julio Montaner, director of the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS

New international think tank champions evidence-based drug policies

In its short history, the International Centre for Science in Drug Policy (ICS DP) has already had a big impact. It has galvanized public support for the inclusion of evidence-based research in the formation of illicit drug policy and attracted support from leading names in medicine, academia and healthcare.

Dr. Evan Wood, a researcher at the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE) and co-director of the Urban Health Research Initiative, founded the ICS DP and launched the organization in April 2010. This was done in conjunction with the release of an international report on the effect of law enforcement on violence in the illicit drug market.

“The ICS DP is an effort to provide policy-relevant evidence that, if followed, will help to protect community health and safety,” said Dr. Wood. “Despite evidence proving its ineffectiveness, policymakers continue to rely almost solely on police and prisons to address the illicit drug problem. Through high-quality research, the ICS DP is determined to help educate the public and policymakers on the need for greater inclusion of scientific evidence into illicit drug policies.”

The ICS DP is an international network of scientists, academics, and health practitioners committed to improving the health and safety of communities and individuals affected by illicit drugs. To this end, it intends to conduct research on illicit drug policy issues, disseminate the findings, and collaborate with scientists and institutions across continents and disciplines.

“The ICS DP is a very important new initiative for the BC-CfE,” said Dr. Julio Montaner, director of the BC-CfE, president of the International AIDS Society and one of the members of the ICS DP’s scientific board. “The ICS DP is an international collaboration of the highest order, bringing together some of the most respected minds in research and science around the world. At the BC-CfE, we are known for conducting leading edge research that aims to provide valuable insights to inform health and public policy. The ICS DP will continue that tradition.”

In addition to Dr. Montaner, the ICS DP’s scientific board includes key global leaders in HIV/AIDS, addiction and public health such as Michel D. Kazatchkine, executive director, The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria; Dr. David Nutt, chair of the Independent Scientific Committee on Drugs and Professor of Neuropsychopharmacology, Imperial College, London; and Richard Horton, editor-in-chief, *The Lancet*.

The ICS DP’s first report was a comprehensive research report titled *Effect of Drug Law Enforcement on Drug-Related Violence: Evidence from a Scientific Review*. Researchers conducted a



Dr. Evan Wood Photo: Martin Dee/UBC

systematic review of all available English-language scientific literature dating back more than 20 years to examine the impacts of drug-related law enforcement on drug-market violence. An overwhelming majority (87 per cent) of the studies reviewed showed that tougher law enforcement is associated with increasing levels of drug-related crime, homicide and gun violence.

The research findings were reported by some leading international media outlets including *The Associated Press*, *Fox News*, *CNN.com* and *The Independent* in the U.K. A similar report by Dr. Wood about the effect of law enforcement on drug-related violence in Canada was released in March this year.

In an effort to reduce the supply and use of illicit drugs, former U.S. President Richard Nixon first declared America’s ‘War on Drugs.’ Four decades later, bloody scenes of drug-related violence in Mexico, several U.S. cities, Third World countries and very recently Jamaica all make the same case: the war on drugs has failed.

Since 2006, in Mexico alone, crackdowns on drug cartels by police have resulted in 23,000 drug-related deaths – including those of innocent civilians. The ‘get tough’ approach has not only failed to achieve its primary objective to meaningfully reduce drug supply, but in fact, has caused a range of unintended consequences such as spreading disease, increasing violence, breaking up families and increasing taxpayer burden.

While the war on drugs continues, countries such as Portugal, the Netherlands and Switzerland have successfully established alternative regulatory models that are informed by science and focus resources on prevention and treatment of drug abuse. As a result, Portugal has seen a dramatic reduction in HIV rates and has the lowest rates of marijuana use in the European Union, while the Netherlands’ marijuana use is lower than that of the U.S.



HIV risk factors for women vary among provinces

The findings of a new national study have revealed that HIV risk factors and clinical indicators for Canadian women vary significantly among provinces.

In B.C., 33.6 per cent of HIV-positive women experienced viral load rebound, which means their treatment stops being effective and the amount of HIV virus in their blood increases. This condition was experienced by 13.5 per cent of women in Quebec and 13.3 per cent in Ontario.

Among other provincial differences, women in B.C. reported higher levels of hepatitis C co-infection and injection drug use. However, women from Ontario and Quebec reported a higher likelihood of heterosexual sex as a risk factor for HIV.

“Women in B.C. are much more marginalized, which explains the higher numbers of hepatitis C co-infection,” said Dr. Bob Hogg, principal investigator of this study and researcher at the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE). “B.C. needs to build programs that allow women to access antiretroviral therapy in order to address the provincial differences in treatment outcomes.”

The study findings are important because they offer key insights that will help provide women in Canada and other countries with better and more focused treatment options.

This study was conducted by the Canadian Observational Cohort (CANOC), the largest HIV cohort study group in Canada. Researchers analyzed data from 904 HIV-positive Canadian women who began HIV treatment after December 31, 1999.

Of these participants, 402 were from B.C., 277 from Ontario, and 225 from Quebec.

Chronic heroin users can benefit from prescription heroin

Prescribing heroin to chronic opiate users under medical supervision can be more effective than methadone to help keep them in treatment programs and off street drugs, concluded a study recently published in *The Lancet*.

“History tells us that availability of heroin prescription can be dictated more by special interests and politics than evidence,” said a group of researchers from the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE) in an accompanying comment published with the study.

Dr. Thomas Kerr along with his colleagues Drs. Julio Montaner

and Evan Wood said in their commentary, *The Science and Politics of Heroin Prescription*, that denying effective treatments such as heroin prescription to select groups is “unethical.”

This study was conducted by researchers at King’s College in London. The trial involved 127 addicts who were receiving methadone treatment but continued to use street heroin regularly. Study participants were randomly assigned to receive either injectable heroin or methadone. After six months, more than two-thirds of those on heroin had no sign of street heroin in their urine at least half the time they were tested. In comparison, less than a third of addicts receiving methadone reported a similar number of “clean” tests.

HAARTbeats

Updated HAART guidelines lead to significant benefits

Applying the highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) guidelines updated in 2008 by the International AIDS Society (IAS) for commencing HIV treatment will significantly decrease new infections, save thousands of lives and avert billions of dollars in costs in B.C. These were among the findings of a new study conducted by researchers from the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE) and published in *PLoS ONE*, an international, peer-reviewed research journal.

“The study results are critically important,” said Dr. Julio Montaner, director of the BC-CfE and president of the IAS. “They reinforce the significant individual and societal benefits of starting earlier HIV

treatment and provide further momentum for treatment as prevention, which in the absence of a cure remains the best way to contain and halt the spread of HIV.”

When the study was conducted, 4,379 people were on HAART in B.C. under 2006 guidelines, and an additional 6,781 individuals qualified for treatment based on the 2008 guidelines.

Results demonstrated that HAART expansion would result in a prompt decrease in HIV/AIDS morbidity and mortality and a decrease in new HIV infections.

COMMUNITY PROFILE

YouthCO creates supportive social space for HIV-positive gay youth



Stephanie Grant

A new initiative by YouthCO AIDS Society is providing valuable social support for young gay men living with HIV.

The Social, launched earlier this year, is a monthly gathering that

offers a safe environment for HIV-positive youth to discuss the day-to-day issues affecting their lives. Although The Social is not currently funded, it continues to grow because of dedicated volunteers. YouthCO's actively seeking opportunities for funding, and hopes to expand on this much needed project in the near future.

"The key is that it's not a traditional support group," says Stephanie Grant, executive director of YouthCO. "That model hasn't been very successful in engaging young poz guys."

Instead, The Social provides a non-judgmental peer setting for members to talk about HIV-related issues, from concerns about status disclosure and criminalization to coping with stigma and treatment side effects.

"The Social has grown from two to 15 participants over the last six months. It appears to be a much needed service in the community, since there are no other services in the community that are addressing their needs," says Grant.

"Since being HIV positive can be very isolating for a lot of young gay men, The Social presents them with a chance to meet, hang out together, and build community in a totally confidential and safe space. They are also able to ask questions, and talk about their experiences in a real and open way," says Grant.

The program's emphasis on peer support is grounded in a belief that youth are the experts on their own experience and are uniquely positioned to educate and support each other.

For more information on The Social and other YouthCO programs, please visit www.youthco.org or call 604-688-1441.

> Quick Facts about YouthCO

- YouthCO is Canada's first youth-driven organization leading the HIV and hepatitis C movement through peer education, support and shared leadership.
- Their youth-driven mandate means that their Board of Directors, volunteers, positive members and programming staff are all youth between the ages of 15 and 29 and represent a diversity of backgrounds and experience.
- They provide hundreds of peer-led sexual health and harm reduction education workshops annually in mainstream schools, post-secondary institutions, alternative programs, youth detention centres, drop-in facilities, and at various special events.

YouthCO's Upcoming Move and Annual Fundraiser

At the end of July, YouthCO will be moving from its current location on Helmcken Street and they are still looking for space. Anyone with appropriate space available, please contact Kelly L'Hirondelle (YouthCO's new executive director) at 604-688-1441. They are also hosting their annual signature event and fundraiser, 'Acquired Taste,' on July 9 at 151 West Cordova Street, Gastown (the old Storyeum Building). Funds from this year's event will go towards building a new youth-friendly space at a yet-to-be-determined new location.

BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS

- > Improve the health of British Columbians with HIV through comprehensive research and treatment programs;
- > Develop cost-effective research and therapeutic protocols;
- > Provide educational support programs to health-care professionals;
- > Monitor the impact of HIV/AIDS on B.C. and conduct analyses of the effectiveness of HIV-related programs.

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