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Clinic expanding to double number treated for opioid use disorder

KELOWNA – Access to medical treatment for opioid use disorder has been increased following the expansion of Interior Health’s Opioid Agonist Treatment (OAT) Clinic.

The addition of three new physicians and two nurse practitioners this winter has allowed the clinic to offer evening and weekend appointments. The number of people receiving treatment is expected to double.

“Every day, here in Kelowna and across B.C., we see how OAT saves lives, reduces withdrawal symptoms, and helps people find a pathway to healing and hope,” said Mental Health and Addictions Minister Judy Darcy. “Expanding access to this life-saving treatment means that more people can get the help they need when they need it.”

OAT is an evidence-based, first-line treatment that uses prescribed medications, such as suboxone and methadone.

The medications provide long-acting relief from withdrawal and cravings, and help people lead a more stable life. People like Kelowna’s Andrew Leeking, who has been receiving OAT since July 2018. Andrew calls the health-care service “a lifesaver.”

“My little girl has always looked at me like I’m Superman, and I want to be Superman again,” he says. “I’ve always been a dedicated worker and friend but when you are on heroin on the street, that is taken away from you. This (OAT) is allowing me to become Andrew again, at 52 years old. It is also allowing me to really figure things out this time – to really investigate the reasons behind what I do, because the medication doesn’t fog up my mind.”

People starting on this program are typically able to stabilize quickly so they can focus on other aspects of their lives, such as engaging in other treatment goals, and reconnecting with family and friends.

The recent expansion of hours has allowed the clinic to adopt a rapid-access model, with walk-in access to a prescriber daily from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. Weekend and evening appointments were added in response to client feedback that said many people miss appointments because they need to be at work.

“Particularly in light of the ongoing overdose emergency, we need to remove as many barriers to service as possible,” says Interior Health Board Chair Doug Cochrane. “OAT is a critical service for many people with opioid use disorder. In addition to addressing their symptoms, time and again we hear this treatment gives people hope.”

The OAT clinic is located within Kelowna’s Community Health Services Centre at 505 Doyle Ave. and serves people living throughout the Central Okanagan region.

The Central Okanagan has been significantly impacted by the overdose crisis and responding is a high priority for Interior Health. In 2018, there were a total of 232 illicit drug overdose deaths within Interior Health.

Expansion of OAT services is a key part of Interior Health's response to the overdose emergency. Other actions include overdose prevention services and the mobile supervised consumption services; enhanced surveillance to better track overdoses; participation in the BC Take Home Naloxone program; and enhanced mental health and substance use treatment programs, including increased outreach and follow-up efforts.

For more information about OAT, talk to your primary care provider or contact your local Interior Health [mental health & substance use centre](#).

To learn more about Interior Health's response to the opioid overdose crisis, visit www.interiorhealth.ca.