British Columbia (BC) Safer Supply Policies: Deprescribing as an Unintended Consequence

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Background: Interim clinical guidance was introduced in BC, Canada in March 2020 to allow for prescribing of safer supply (PSS) during the dual public health emergencies (COVID-19 and Toxic Drug Crisis). In 2021, the Government of BC introduced a policy direction to decouple PSS from a pandemic response and continue PSS. Nonetheless, due in part to the controversy and uncertainty about the status of PSS, there was a wave of deprescribing with the sunsetting of the interim guidance. Our objective was to explore the experiences and consequences of deprescribing for people receiving PSS.

Methodology: As part of a provincial mixed methods evaluation, we conducted 30 qualitative interviews with those deprescribed.

- Mean Age: 43 Years
- Men = 16; Women =13 Missing =1.
- Data were collected between December, 2023 and March 31, 2024
- Thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke 6 stage process.

Findings:

Prescribing: Pathway to Recovery

Like I went down from using every single day down to not using at all. And my habit kind of came back, after me being off of it. (9991)

Deprescribing: Pathway Back

I just got violently sick and started using street drugs again. Well, it affected me terribly. I lost my home. I live in a homeless shelter now. (7719)

My street use [went up], my son .. noticed it dramatically.. and it's caused a bit of a rift in that when I was on safe supply, our relationship was starting to mend as well. So, there was a lot of good things coming from it…When I lost it ..everything sort of went back, back the other way again fairly quickly. (4700)

Unregulated Drug Market: Ongoing Declared Public Health Emergency

Deprescribing Process:

- Sudden & abrupt
- Belief that program was ending
- Missed appointments & pharmacy dispensations due to meeting survival needs, family emergencies, lack of follow up & clinic/pharmacy hours

Deprescribing Impacts:

- Stress, worry, anxiety
- Unmanaged pain
- Withdrawal, overdose risk
- Loss of trust in health care system

Conclusion:

Deprescribing is an unintended consequence of drug policy shifts with potentially hazardous consequences as a result of return to the unregulated drug market.

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