

CANADIAN AFFAIRS

‘We just hand out pills’, father of overdose victim tells MPs about safer supply programs

In a House committee meeting Tuesday, grieving father Gregory Sword provided a poignant account of the problems with safer supply

by [Alexandra Keeler](#) September 25, 2024



Gregory Sword fights back tears during his testimony at the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health meeting ‘Opioid Epidemic and Toxic Drug Crisis in Canada’ on Sept. 24. (Screenshot/House of Commons)

In a poignant testimony that laid bare the devastating toll of Canada’s opioid crisis, Gregory Sword, father of a 14-year-old overdose victim, urged the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health to confront the failures of safer supply programs.

Despite the emotional weight of his story, neither Liberal nor NDP committee members asked Sword any questions during the 2.5-hour session, choosing instead to engage with the expert witnesses.

“I had to sit there and watch my daughter commit suicide for a year without being able to help her,” Sword said during the committee’s Sept. 24 meeting.

His daughter, Kamilah, died from an [overdose](#) in August 2022. Sword is pursuing a class-action lawsuit against the B.C. and federal governments for alleged negligence related to safer supply programs.

Since November, the House of Commons committee has been studying Canada’s opioid epidemic. The committee has been focused on the effectiveness of current harm reduction strategies, including controversial safer supply programs.

Proponents argue safer supply offers a regulated, pharmaceutical-grade alternative to toxic street drugs, which can prevent overdoses and connect individuals with addiction to treatment. Critics say such programs fail to address the root causes of addiction and potentially increase drug use and diversion.

The [meeting](#) underscored the ongoing tension between supporters and critics of these programs.



Witnesses join in person and online during the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health meeting ‘Opioid Epidemic and Toxic Drug Crisis in Canada’ on Sept. 24. (Screenshot/House of Commons)

‘One click’

In his testimony, Sword discussed how easy access to safe supply drugs — such as Dilaudid, or “dillies” — contributed to his daughter’s addiction and eventual death.

“The ease that she was able to get safe supply was just one click on Snapchat, and she would be able to get any drugs she wanted within five minutes,” he said.

Sword, who travelled from his home in Port Coquitlam, B.C., at his own expense to attend the meeting, shared the challenges he faced watching his daughter cycle between overdoses and hospitalizations for two years.

He expressed frustration with mental health professionals who quickly discharged Kamilah, and with drug counselors who insisted it was not possible to intervene because Kamilah was not explicitly asking for help.

He explained that the lack of action following his daughter’s death put her friends at risk. Several have overdosed multiple times since Kamilah’s death. He is also frustrated by the lack of funding for treatment, pointing out that one friend had to wait more than a month to secure a rehab bed after seeking help.

“Even after [Kamilah] died, [drug dealers] were still messaging her cellphone,” said Sword, in response to a question from Laila Goodridge, the Conservative MP who invited Sword to attend the meeting. “My friend had access to her Snapchat account, and they were still asking if she’d need any dillies.”

Gregory Sword speaks during the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health meeting ‘Opioid Epidemic and Toxic Drug Crisis in Canada’ on Sept. 24. (Screenshot/House of Commons)

Other witnesses also emphasized the negative impact recent drug policies have had on youth.

Dr. Patricia Conrod, a clinical psychologist from Université de Montréal, highlighted the need for evidence-based prevention programs. She noted that safer supply initiatives have increased youth access to potent opioids, and stressed the importance of providing services such as therapy and counselling alongside harm reduction. Conrod also pointed to social media as a youth drug-use enabler.

“Using social media impacts your cognitive development and makes a young person more disinhibited and impulsive, and it contributes to ADHD symptoms,” she said. “We know that all three of those behavioural profiles and symptoms place a person at much higher risk for early onset substance misuse.”

Dr. Martyn Judson, an addiction specialist from London, Ont., criticized safe supply clinics for inadequate oversight, leading to [opioid diversion](#). “The perpetuation of a supply of opioids is ... perpetuating the addiction. It’s not doing anything to change the lifestyle of the individual.”

He condemned excessive doses and lack of witnessed dosing as “unconscionable” and “tantamount to negligence.”

After the session, Sword expressed his frustration about the lack of questions from Liberal and NDP committee members.

“I have no problems with the experts talking, but ask me some questions, and I probably could give you a better answer than the experts on how that really affects parents and their kids,” he said.

“I hope this opens up their eyes to realize that there needs to be accountability for their decisions,” said Sword.

“They can’t just be like, ‘Oh, we’re going to do this and it doesn’t affect us’ because there’s no face. Now they can put my daughter’s face to their decisions.”