

Adam Zivo: The heartbreaking consequences of giving addicted youth medical autonomy

Providing drug paraphernalia to minors, while allowing them to opt out of treatment, is a recipe for disaster

Published Sep 13, 2024 • Last updated 1 day ago • 4 minute read



Brianna MacDonald, 13, overdosed in homeless camp in Abbotsford, B.C. Photo by GOFUNDME

Brianna MacDonald was only 13 years old when she was [found dead](#) of a suspected overdose in a B.C. homeless encampment last month. Her grieving parents say that the province refused their repeated pleas to force her into treatment, providing her instead with free needles and pamphlets on how to use drugs “safely,” and are now calling for reform.

This tragedy was the inevitable crescendo of the B.C. NDP's [laissez-faire drug policies](#), under which [enablement](#) has consistently been prioritized over rehabilitation. If Premier David Eby has any decency, he should listen to MacDonald's parents and immediately permit the involuntary treatment of drug-addicted minors so that no other child suffers as she did.

According to Brianna's mother, Sarah MacDonald, her daughter struggled with severe mental-health issues and, turning to drugs to cope, began smoking marijuana at just 10 years old, before escalating to ecstasy two years later. Despite her young age, she allegedly received free harm-reduction paraphernalia from Fraser Health, one of the province's five health authorities.

After being hospitalized for a suspected overdose in February, Brianna was transferred to a child psychiatric ward at Surrey Memorial Hospital where, according to her mother, she stuck pencils through her own hand.

Though her parents begged the hospital to keep her institutionalized and administer addiction treatment, they were told that Brianna had the right to make her own medical decisions, despite her mental instability, young age and history of drug use.

She was thus discharged, but her violent behaviour at home troubled her parents, who, out of concern for her siblings, were forced to place her in a youth centre in Abbotsford. She subsequently ran away and ended up in a local homeless encampment, where her mother would visit her (they texted or spoke every day).

But then, in the middle of the night of Aug. 23, she overdosed again and, despite the best efforts of emergency responders, did not survive. Her parents say that she died inside her tent, but police couldn't confirm whether her overdose occurred within the encampment or nearby.

The MacDonalds are now asking the province to enact reforms that will strengthen parental rights so that drug-addicted youth can be placed in involuntary treatment and denied access to "harm-reduction" supplies that seemingly enable drug use.

Children "are not able to buy alcohol, they are not able to buy marijuana at the marijuana store, they can't buy cigarettes, but they can have access to crack pipes and kits to be able to do safe injection? It's just wrong," her step-father, Lance Charles, [told CTV News](#).

The B.C. Conservatives [have since pledged](#) to implement involuntary treatment for addicts of all ages who "pose a risk to themselves and others," should they be elected next month. The announcement builds upon the demands of a [growing chorus](#) of B.C. mayors who have endorsed involuntary treatment following an increase in horrifying stranger attacks.

Harm-reduction activists, many of whom are [active drug users](#) and see access to illicit substances as a human right, have [generally opposed](#) such reforms.

During the B.C. NDP leadership race in 2022, [Eby said](#) that he supported involuntary treatment for addicts who repeatedly overdose. He then [softened his position](#) after becoming premier and, since then, has been [repeatedly criticized](#) for doing very little on the issue.

In the lead-up to next month's provincial election, Eby's government has rescinded many unpopular harm-reduction experiments it previously supported — such as drug paraphernalia distributed

through [vending machines](#) and home delivery — so it is possible that the push for involuntary treatment may yet succeed. Political opportunism can, at times, be quite conducive to the public good.

But while public attention has been focused on involuntary treatment, it is imperative that the province implement deeper reforms regarding youth and medical autonomy.

In Canada, minors generally have the right to provide (or withhold) consent for their own medical treatments, but while some provinces, such as Quebec, set a minimum age for this, B.C. has no

The [B.C. Infants Act](#) stipulates that minors can make their own treatment decisions, regardless of their parents' wishes, so long as a health-care provider believes that “the infant understands the nature and consequences and the reasonably foreseeable benefits and risks” of the intervention.

But as Brianna's case demonstrates, the bar for competency appears to be quite low. Drug addiction is apparently not given much weight in these assessments, even though it hijacks the brain and inhibits rational decision-making.

This overly permissive approach prevents children from being forced into addiction treatment against their will. Worse yet, it means that parents also cannot prohibit their kids from receiving harm-reduction paraphernalia, such as syringes and crack pipes, or “[safer supply](#)” drugs like fentanyl and hydromorphone, as these items are considered a form of health care.

Some parents — most notably Greg Sword, whose [14-year-old daughter died](#) of drug-related causes after getting addicted to diverted safer supply opioids — have tried [to raise awareness](#) of this issue, only to be ignored.

Much could be fixed if a more reasonable definition of youth competency were to be legislated into existence — ideally one in which addiction is explicitly recognized as impairing rationality and parents are given far more say over related interventions.

Not only would this address severe cases like Brianna's, it would also allow parents to impose earlier interventions, such as counselling, before their children's drug use spirals out of control.

Adam Zivo is executive director of the Centre For Responsible Drug Policy.