



Peers Give the Gears ...



Recently, I had the opportunity to work with five fine high school students in preparing and delivering HARM REDUCTION presentation to grades 11 & 12 on their CAPP day.

Their participation came as a result of a presentation made to the student council by Nicky Thiessen, a fourth year nursing student from UNBC. As part of Nicky's practicum, she had to develop and implement a community development project. She chose to do an alcohol & other drug survey at NVSS to see what drugs were available, who was using what, where they used, and how often. She checked the level of knowledge by asking students if they thought specific substances were addictive, and asked students opinion about what would be helpful in reducing drug use in our community.

Most of the results were not unexpected. Teens in this town don't stray too far from what Canadian stats indicate - that is, not too many of them use much of anything in grade eight and if they do, not too often. But as the years wear on, more students use more substances more often. This is the general trend all over BC and the rest of the country.

However, one tidbit I found most interesting was the number of students who claimed that ALCOHOL was NOT addictive or that they were NOT SURE if it was addictive! This surprised me. I have been running on the assumption in the last few years that everyone knows that alcohol is addictive. Obviously, I've been mistaken about that. This is precisely why it is a good idea to check in with the people we serve - so that we can make sure we are educating them on issues about which they need to learn.

On the other hand, it may have been a folly in the survey itself that elicited those responses. It seemed as though the respondents who answered that they used alcohol and/or other drugs were the ones most likely to get the addiction question wrong. Maybe they've baked too many brain cells?? Well, not likely... not yet anyway... It might be that they thought the question was whether they thought THEY were addicted to alcohol. It would explain the great number of NO's for that question.

Furthermore, the responses for what would be helpful in reducing drug use in our community weighed heavily in favour of increase in punishment or penalties! Prevention education came in last place with harm reduction strategies a close second. This also surprised me. Yet, when one takes a closer look.... we are asking young people who, when they do something "bad" more often than not get some form of punishment. Do they get information? Do they get education? Probably not (and I'm speaking generally here). They get punishment and are left to figure it out all on their own and hope they get it right the next time. So why wouldn't we expect them to give that as the answer? And, in the same respect, if they are supposed to figure it all out on their own, why wouldn't we expect them to do drugs as well?

The last piece that I found interesting about this whole process was the presentation the five students and I put together. Thanks to them, I discovered that I'm not too off the mark in terms of giving the information they and their peers need. They didn't change much from the presentation I offered as a starting point. That's good. Young people need to know what to do when their friend passes out and won't wake up. They need to understand the latest drugs that are out there so that they have that knowledge prior to being offered the drug, rather than getting it after they're already addicted. Young people also need to hear this stuff from their peers. I can tell sad stories and be as entertaining as I can in order to engage them - but in the end I'm still 35 years old and at a different place than they are. When they hear words of caring and caution from their own peers - their own friends - they are much more likely to accept the information.

So thank you to the brave students who volunteered to help me! You did a great job and I look forward to hearing about the wonderful things you will go on to do in the world!

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