

Facts and politics in the war on AIDS

Dr. Julio Montaner is in a race against political ignorance and denial to find a solution to the spread of HIV

BY SEAN CONDON
STREET NEWS SERVICE

Deep inside the maze of offices in St. Paul's Hospital, Vancouver, B.C.'s Dr. Julio Montaner leads a global revolution to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS. For the past four decades, the Argentine-born doctor has been at the forefront of finding treatments for the infected and reaching others before they suffer the same fate.

Having helped create the world's most effective HIV treatment therapy and spearheading a campaign for point-of-care testing for at-risk groups, Montaner's research has helped save hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of lives, from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside to Portland's dark allies to sub-Saharan Africa.

The director of the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS and past-president of the International AIDS Society, Montaner has been well recognized for his work — most recently, he was awarded the prestigious Albert Einstein World Award of Science. He is now pushing countries to adopt the Vienna Declaration, which calls on governments around the world to decriminalize drug users and remove barriers to effective HIV prevention, treatment and care.

But despite his many accomplishments, the extremely passionate and vocal Montaner has been involved in a long-running feud with Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservative government over the fate of Vancouver's safe-injection site, its decision to expand jail cells and the lack of funding to tackle the disease.

Montaner recently sat down with Street Roots' sister paper, Megaphone, in his small office in St. Paul's Hospital and spoke about the purpose behind the Vienna Declaration, his fight to help the Downtown Eastside control its HIV/AIDS rates, and how Canada and the world needs to refocus its energy on the HIV treatment before the crisis spirals out of control.

Sean Condon: Vancouver City Council recently endorsed the Vienna Declaration. What do you think that means for the city?

Julio Montaner: Vancouver has been at

the forefront of trying to develop evidence-based policies to help us to deal with the drug addiction problem and HIV, so I think it's only a natural development that city council made a clear statement where their heart and their brains lie.

I contrast that with the attitude of the federal government, which, in my opinion, is highly neglectful, irresponsible, dogmatic and trenchant on hypocritical principles that are not supported by evidence. The same

the front lines, have no difficulty telling you they are not interested because they have no idea what they are talking about.

S.C.: *There is a great deal of support from the city, the province and even the local police for Vancouver's safe injection site, Insite, and yet the federal government is still pursuing the case in the Supreme Court to have it shut down. What impact do you think it would have in Vancouver if it did get shut down?*

"Our ivory tower politicians, who are up in the sky and not even aware of what the realities are like on the front lines, have no difficulty telling you they are not interested because they have no idea what they are talking about."

day that we launched the Vienna Declaration, we received a letter from the Ministry of Health saying they are not even prepared to consider the Declaration because it did not meet the guidelines of the government. For (the federal government) to tell me that we're not embracing it because it doesn't fit our policies, well that's exactly the reason why we're having this discussion.

Having said so, Toronto, Victoria and Vancouver have endorsed the Declaration, which are (cities) in direct contact with the consequences of drug addiction and everything that contributes to the crisis that we have in the inner cities. Our ivory tower politicians, who are up in the sky and not even aware of what the realities are like on

J.M.: It would be beyond my ability to comprehend how anybody in his or her right mind would choose to defy the evidence and ask for the closure of Insite. I don't think for a moment that the local authorities, the provincial authorities or the medical community will be willing to support a recommendation from the federal government to close the site.

You know, we have had unanimous support from professionals at all levels of the health care spectrum throughout the country (and) the support of every Liberal government within the province of British Columbia. I had repeated discussions with the Premier, with the (provincial) Minister of Health, the mayor, all of who repeatedly

have encouraged us to continue the fight to do the right thing based on the evidence.

Never have the representatives of the federal government been able to point out (any) true evidence demonstrating the harms of the site or demonstrating the ill effects of the site. They have based their assertions on ill-conceived third-party reports that were generated through fraudulent action of individuals within the RCMP.

We need more of these sites in Vancouver, in British Columbia, in the rest of the country, and only when we do that are we going to be able to harness a full potential of action for the benefit of those infected, for the benefit of those at risk and for the benefit of the community at large.

S.C.: *Suppose there was an order to close the site, would you recommend that people ignore that order?*

J.M.: I don't discount the possibility of civil disobedience at a large scale if there was an attempt from anybody to close Insite at anytime in the near future. I don't want to say that I'm promoting it or that I am recommending it, but I have to tell you I don't see how a health care provider in good conscience could withdraw services that has now been demonstrated to save lives based on some sort of political ruling.

We have demonstrated decreased mortality associated with the use of Insite; we have demonstrated decreased morbidity—that is, people don't get sick as much; we have demonstrated increased cessation of

Dr. Julio Montaner

