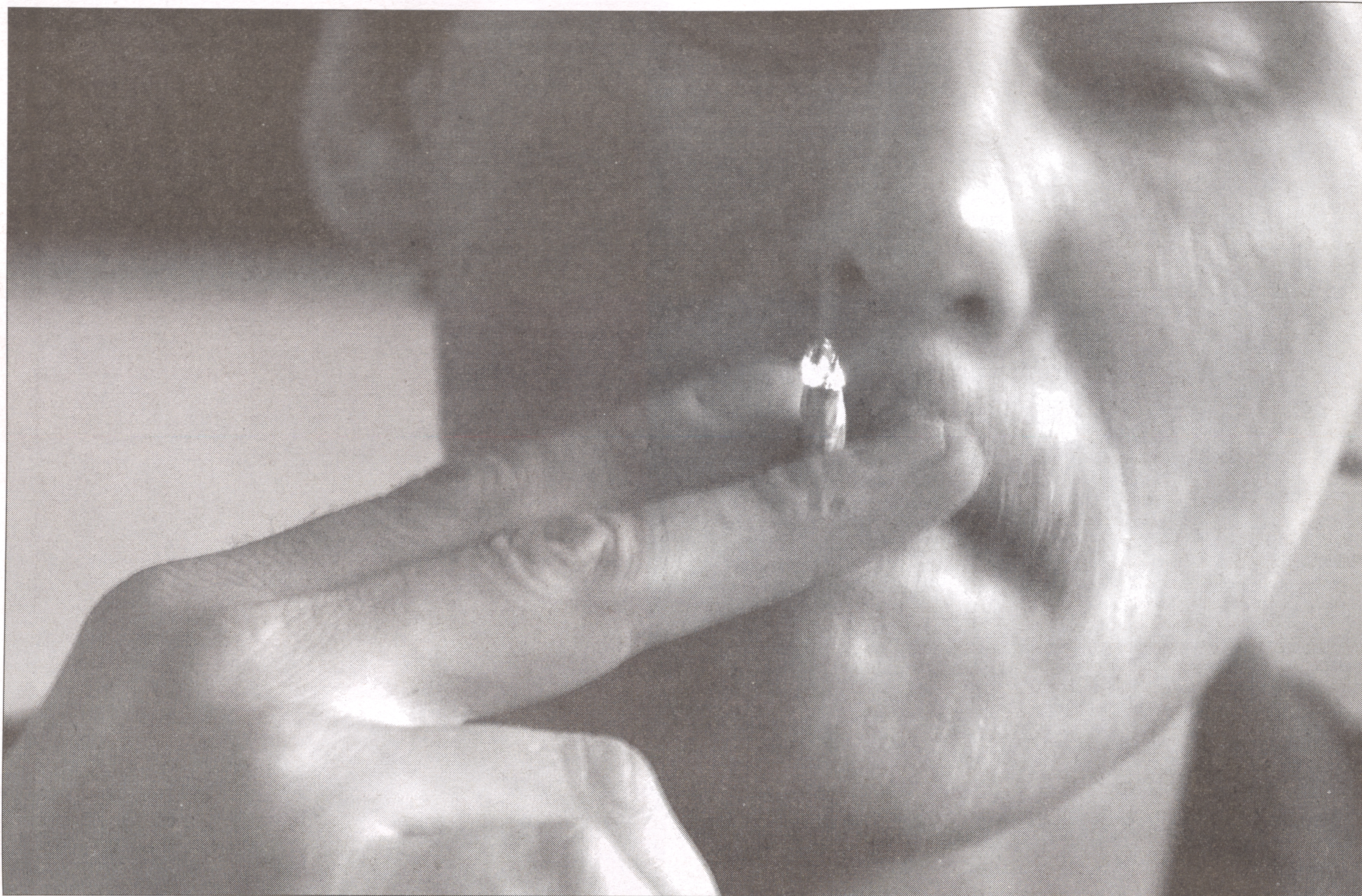

PHOTO: REUTERS/ANDY CLARK

Lance, who asked not to use his last name, smokes marijuana he is legally allowed to grow.

Vancouver, B.C.'s drug revolution

The Canadian city continues to push the envelope of harm reduction and recovery

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STREET NEWS SERVICE

Roots, resistance, and survival in Vancouver's war on drugs began when William Lyon Mackenzie King came to Vancouver, B.C. in the spring of 1908. The battle, in some ways, continues to this day.

The previous September, members and sympathizers of the newly formed Asiatic Exclusion League had descended upon Chinatown by the thousands. Smashing plate glass windows and ripping signs from storefront overhangs, the rioters were finally repelled at Powell Street by club-wielding residents of Japantown. And so the future prime minister found himself in Vancouver, assessing the damage claims of aggrieved business owners.

What King found in Chinatown was a thriving opium industry. Even more troubling to the deputy minister, the drug was regularly being consumed by English-speaking whites. Just a month later, a long title bill, now known simply as the Opium Act, passed through both chambers of Parliament with minimal debate. This was Canada's first anti-drug law – the opening salvo in a war on drugs that continues to this day.

More than a century later, Canadian drug policy is still being hashed out on the streets of Vancouver. Last September, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled unanimously to allow Insite, North America's first legal supervised injection facility, to keep its doors open on East Hastings. Two months later, Mayor Gregor Robertson joined four of his predecessors in an open call for the legalization of marijuana. Last month, Vancouver Coastal Health began offering free crack pipes to stem the oral transmission of disease among users, whose crack use-related lip and mouth injuries can make them vulnerable to HIV and Hepatitis B and C.

These recent developments, which led author and recovering addict Peter Ferentzy to dub Vancouver "the most enlightened city in North America," are underscored by a long and complicated history. It's a history that has been written chiefly in the Downtown Eastside, where the impact of addiction overlaps so messily with the depredations of poverty, illness and social fragmentation. It's a history written by cops and community organizers, by healthcare workers and academics, by politicians, addicts and survivors. It's a history of overdose, epidemic and societal neglect, but also political leadership, community activism, and improbable, tentative hope.

The birth of harm reduction

In 1952, something had to give.

Since Mackenzie King had warned of conniving Chinatown opium peddlers in 1908, federal anti-drug legislation had been moving solely in one direction. In 1911, stricter punishments were introduced for opium users. In 1917, Vancouver's Chief Constable, Malcolm MacLennan, was gunned down in an apartment shootout on East Georgia. His killer was Bob Tait, described in the next day's papers as a "drug-crazed negro." The incident helped to rile up local support for the flurry of sometimes draconian anti-drug legislation in the 1920s.

"Up until the 1950s, if you were a regular drug user, you'd typically spend about a third of each year in prison," says Vancouver historian Lani Russwurm. "You had a revolving door between prison and the street. It was expensive, and it wasn't stopping the spread of the drug trade."

And so, in 1952, the Community Chest and Council, a precursor to the United Way, formed a committee and published a report on drug addiction.

"Narcotic addition," the report read, "is a medical problem." The committee went on to call upon the federal government to begin dispensing drugs to addicts. A heroin user with a steady supply of heroin, the report argued, could live a stable, crime-free life and, once in the program, could be ushered towards rehabilitation.

Today, says Russwurm, we would call such an approach "harm reduction" – the novel idea that the first priority of drug policy should be to keep people alive, safe, and healthy. But in 1952, "it was just a sincere and pragmatic attempt to deal with the issue."

Celebrated in editorials in both The Province and Vancouver Sun, the recommendations of the report were finally quashed by federal opposition. It would take another 40 years before this kind of thinking was again given so much official credence in Vancouver.

"Canada's most notorious underground rendezvous"

Now it's called the Downtown Eastside. In the years after World War II, it was called Skid Road. It might be difficult now to imagine the neighborhood as it was - a seemingly incongruous overlap of vibrancy and squalor. But the area still comprised the downtown core. There was the streetcar, the ferry terminal, the Interurban rail station; there was Woodward's department store, the Pantages theater, and the library.

"At the same time," says Russwurm, "it all coexisted with a seedy drug scene. It was much more discreet. It wasn't in your face like it is now. But it was there."

The decline of the neighborhood came quickly. In the last few years of the decade,

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