



## **New England Journal of Medicine Publishes Results of Groundbreaking BC Addiction Research Trial**

**International health history expert says political factors in North America will dictate effectiveness more than evidence**

**(Vancouver) August 20, 2009** – The Internationally recognized *New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM)* today published the results of Vancouver's ground-breaking prescription heroin and drug substitution research trials today. The North American Opiate Medication Initiative (NAOMI) took over 250 chronic drug addicts and introduced them to heroin-maintenance and substitution treatment over a three-year period (2005-2008).

“We have been strong supporters of the NAOMI project and congratulate the research team on this important international recognition,” said Trish Walsh, Director of the Vancouver-based Inner Change Foundation. “We are working to take NAOMI to the next step and expand treatment options for people with drug addiction in Vancouver and Montreal. With funding just announced by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research to support new substitution research trials, we can expect more groundbreaking results in the future.”

In addition to publishing the NAOMI results, NEJM published an opinion by Virginia Berridge, Ph. D., Professor of History and head of the University of London’s Centre for History in Public Health. Dr. Berridge concludes that the NAOMI data is widely supported by similar experiences in Europe but its effectiveness in North America will be dictated by “political factors” more than evidence.

“We will now wait to see what political or professional factors will support or oppose the conclusions of this study in its home territory,” says Dr. Berridge. “The rise and fall of methods of treatment in this controversial area owe their rationale to evidence, but they also often owe more to the politics of the situation. Will the ‘home grown’ results from the NAOMI trial have more impact in North America than the results from Europe?”

Dr. Berridge points out that historically heroin was the main ‘drug of choice’ for treatment in England and even the United States dating back to the early 1900s. Today, the prescription of heroin is taking place on a small scale in Britain and other European countries. In a November 2008 referendum, 68% of Swiss voters were in favor of continuing that country’s heroin prescription program.

In light of the research findings, Inner Change has called on the government and health authorities to keep the NAOMI clinic open in Vancouver and continue offering heroin maintenance as a treatment for those who have not benefited from other available treatment options.

In addition to receiving a limited daily supply of heroin through NAOMI, addicts spent time with care providers for psychological and social support. A summary of results includes:

- crime went down (prostitution, break & enter, theft)
- health outcomes, quality of life and employment went up
- illicit heroin use fell by almost 70% among those in the study

- the number of days of illegal activity and the amount spent on drugs both decreased by almost half
- the program cost was approximately \$20/day/addict (\$7,500/yr) - compared to the estimated \$55,000/yr an untreated addict costs the health care and criminal justice systems

Another groundbreaking element to NAOMI was the fact that a small group of NAOMI participants were not told that they were prescribed a legal substitute pain medication called *Dilaudid* instead of heroin. Amazingly, they did not notice the difference. This breakthrough will be the subject of NAOMI's next phase.

The Study to Assess Longer-term Opioid Medication Effectiveness (SALOME) will provide substitution treatment in a special trial to more than 200 people with heroin addiction in Montreal and Vancouver over the next three years. In June, the federal government confirmed a contribution of \$1 million over three years for SALOME. This investment will be matched by local health authorities and provincial governments. The Inner Change Foundation is supporting this work by securing donations from the private sector.

“By providing a new option that transitions addicts to legal oral medication and psycho-social treatment that can address the underlying causes of addiction, SALOME will take NAOMI to the next step and offer people with drug addiction another exit opportunity” concluded Ms. Walsh. “If we can show this innovative addiction research treatment works, why wouldn't we move towards this kind of option? If we can offer expanded treatment options for so many other health conditions, why not addiction too?”

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**Backgrounders:**      *New England Journal of Medicine NAOMI Articles – August 2009*  
*Inner Change Foundation Fact Sheet*

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