

Over 700 Signatures in First Week

A grieving Courtenay couple, John and Jennifer Hedican, have partnered with nurse activist Shany Simcoe to create an official House of Commons petition to address the opioid overdose crisis. John and Jennifer lost their 26 year-old son, Ryan Hedican, to fentanyl poisoning on April 24, 2017. They have since been sharing their story with politicians and the public in an effort to destigmatize and raise awareness about substance use, and to push for changes to policy and treatment.

Their petition calls for the declaration of the overdose crisis as a **National Public Health Emergency**^[AD1], to reform current drug policy to decriminalize personal possession, and the creation of a system to provide safe substances. The declaration of a National Public Health Emergency invokes the Emergency Act and allows the establishment of emergency shelters, hospitals and payments and indicates that the government takes the overdose epidemic seriously (1). Decriminalization refers not to the removal of sanctions for all drug-related offences, but only to the simple possession of illicit drugs. This means people who possess drugs for personal use will no longer be forced to use in secret, under fear of arrest. It means they'll be afforded a basic degree of legal protection when accessing harm-reduction services, medical assistance or police services (2). Safe sources include opiate alternatives such as suboxone and methadone but also includes applying the same rigorous quality and safety standards that food, drink and medication receive to substances that people use recreationally or chronically (3). The major contributor to fatal overdoses is the inconsistent inclusion of fentanyl and fentanyl analogues in many illicitly obtained substances.

Shany Simcoe is a Registered Nurse who has been working with individuals who use substances since before the overdose crisis began. She has been both providing front-line service to people at risk of overdose and lobbying politicians for awareness and action. The two parties were introduced to each other by their local MP, Gord Johns, after he was approached by each separately advocating for his support on concrete action to address the overdose crisis. Thus, the petition project was born. Both the Hedicans and Simcoe agree that the process of collaboration was easy as their motivations were closely aligned. Their different but complimentary perspectives have resulted in a successful partnership and tangible product that has been embraced by the online community. Within its first week, the petition has obtained over 700 signatures from individuals of every province across the Country.

The number of signatures is significant since petitions with 500 signatures are certified, presented in the House of Commons and must receive an official response from the government.^[AD2] Every signature indicates to the government the seriousness of the issue. The group is aiming to obtain 8,000 signatures by the petition closing date of July 25, 2018.

The group stresses the urgency of this issue because Canadians are dying every day from preventable overdoses, partly due to the contamination of their drug of choice and partly due to pervasive stigma towards substance use. To date, this crisis has resulted in more deaths than every other public health emergency in the past 20 year combined. The figures show the overwhelming number of deaths are people aged 19-59. Of those, 82 per cent are male and 94 per cent are people dying indoors, the majority of them in their homes. Both the Hedicans and Simcoe would like ultimately, for substance use to be treated entirely as a health – rather than criminal justice – issue.

Readers can sign and share the e-petition by

visiting: <https://petitions.ourcommons.ca/en/Petition/Details?Petition=e-1586>. There is no minimum age limit to who can sign a petition. A person may only sign a petition once.

A printed version of the petition can be downloaded at: <http://gordjohns.ndp.ca/petitions>

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References:

- (1) <http://www.metronews.ca/news/vancouver/2018/01/14/it-s-not-working-vancouver-mp-renews-call-for-opioid-emergency.html>
- (2) <http://vancouversun.com/opinion/op-ed/caitlin-shane-drug-prohibition-is-the-radical-policy-not-legal-regulation>
- (3) <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/dec/05/portugals-radical-drugs-policy-is-working-why-hasnt-the-world-copied-it>