

B.C.'s chief coroner exits, frustrated and disappointed with government's response to overdose crisis

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B.C. chief coroner Lisa Lapointe speaks during a news conference at the B.C. Legislature, in Victoria, on Feb. 24, 2020. CHAD HIPOLITO/THE CANADIAN PRESS

British Columbia's chief coroner Lisa Lapointe says she's a hopeful person, but she is leaving her office frustrated and disappointed.

Angry, even, with drug overdose deaths expected to hit record levels this year.

The B.C. Coroners Service issued a public safety warning Wednesday, citing increases in overdose deaths "above earlier indications," when 189 deaths were reported in October.

“While data is still under review, preliminary indications suggest unregulated drug toxicity has caused more than 200 deaths in November, 2023, and that the province has averaged about seven deaths per day for the past seven weeks,” said a coroners service statement.

The statement said the coroners service historically does not issue an update report in December, but it will now to “ensure that people are aware of the continuing risks related to the unregulated drug market and of recent increases in deaths reported.”

Ms. Lapointe has been at the forefront of the province’s battle against toxic drug overdoses for years, but she said the public health emergency that was declared in 2016 never received a “a co-ordinated response commensurate with the size of this crisis.”

Instead, she lamented a “one-off, beds and projects” response to the emergency that the B.C. Coroners Service says has claimed more than 13,000 lives.

“We see these ad hoc announcements but sadly what we haven’t seen is a thoughtful, evidence-based, data-driven plan for how we are going to reduce the number of deaths in our province,” Ms. Lapointe said in an interview Monday.

Ms. Lapointe, who retires in February, said she was particularly worried about what she feared was the creep of politics into vital public health decisions surrounding overdose policies.

She wondered whether the government even read a recent coroners service death review panel report that recommended providing controlled drugs to people without prescriptions.

The proposal was immediately rejected by the government last month, moments before Ms. Lapointe had an opportunity to present the conclusions at a news conference.

“It’s hard, especially now, there are a lot of ideologies battling over this. It’s become a very political issue, unfortunately,” Ms. Lapointe said.

Health Minister Adrian Dix said he has read the death review panel report.

“When the coroner issues reports on whatever subjects, they get detailed attention at every level,” he said.

The government understands and knows a “comprehensive response” is required to address B.C.’s ongoing overdose crisis, Mr. Dix said Wednesday.

“In no area of health care have we added resources, added staff more [than] in the area of mental health and addictions,” Mr. Dix said. “The coroner’s job is an extremely difficult job and as someone who’s reflected on and worked on and engaged with families on these issues for a few years, I understand that she would be frustrated.”

Mr. Lapointe has had an “extremely positive impact” and “made a real contribution,” he said.

Ms. Lapointe said that instead of abating, the crisis is poised to have its deadliest year yet.

“We know that last year we had almost 2,400 deaths and this year we are likely to see it even higher,” she said. “This year is looking to be the worst year ever in terms of lives lost to drug toxicity.”

For months, the NDP government has faced opposition challenges about its safe-supply initiatives amid concerns about drug use in public areas and police investigations of government-funded organizations providing illegal drugs obtained from the underground market.

“Well, I’m sorry, but buying drugs from the dark web, supporting organized crime, is not life-saving work. It actually puts police and the public at risk,” Opposition BC United Leader Kevin Falcon said in the legislature in October.

Mr. Falcon’s remarks came after Vancouver police said search warrants were executed at the Vancouver office of the Drug User Liberation Front, which had been buying, testing and distributing drugs in an effort to prevent overdose deaths. Two people were arrested.

Premier David Eby said the government’s contract to provide funding to DULF was terminated. “Even though they were doing that important life-saving work, they were breaking the law and we can’t have it,” he said earlier.

It was against this backdrop that the death review panel issued its Nov. 1 report. It estimated 225,000 people in B.C. were using unregulated drugs but fewer than 5,000 people a month had prescriptions to receive safe-supply drugs.

It said a fundamentally different approach was needed to save lives because “incremental increases in existing interventions” weren’t likely to make much of an impact.

Michael Egilson, chair of the panel, said its first recommendation was that an application be made to the federal government for an exemption to the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act to allow access to opioid and stimulant drugs without a prescription.

The B.C. government was having none of it.

“I cannot accept the primary recommendations of this report to pursue a nonprescriber model of safer supply,” said Jennifer Whiteside, B.C.’s minister of mental health and addictions, in a letter to Lapointe issued minutes before her scheduled news conference on the report.

Six weeks later and Lapointe doubts the report got due consideration.

“I think for government to dismiss those recommendations out of hand without even, I’m not even sure they read the report as the response came back so quickly,” Ms. Lapointe said. “You can’t help but feel perhaps we did run into the politics of the issue.”

She said she believed it was “very much a political response” and to this day the government has not provided any response about it to her office.

Ms. Lapointe said she was saddened but won’t stop supporting efforts to reverse the overdose crisis.

She said she looks to former B.C. chief coroners like Vince Cain, who championed treatment over criminal charges for people struggling with addiction, and Larry Campbell, who led the charge for safe consumption sites.

“I’m not by nature a negative person, and I like to be hopeful and I think that’s what frustrates me,” Ms. Lapointe said.

“I want to be hopeful that we can turn this crisis around and I think it takes courage, and I’m ever hopeful our political leaders whether elected or not will at some point recognize [it],” she said. “It sounds naive, but we need to collaborate if we truly want to reduce the suffering that we’re seeing and the deaths we are experiencing.”

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