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Dear Colleague,

Attached is a paper entitled ***CAMH and Harm Reduction: A Background Paper on its Meaning and Applications for Substance Use***. This paper and its Executive Summary were recently approved by CAMH's Board of Trustees and represent the Centre's approach to harm reduction.

As you may be aware, public policy development is one of the Centre's long-term priorities. Since October 1999, the Centre has dedicated resources to public policy development, and with input from staff, clients, families and stakeholders, has developed positions on key issues of importance to our clients. Harm reduction is one of these key issues.

Because the meaning, practice and implications of harm reduction continue to be matters of considerable discussion, Centre experts suggested that establishing a CAMH evidence-based definition of harm reduction might bring greater clarity to the public debate. Because there is a scarcity of hard evidence in the field, a secondary objective was to make the case for more research funding, to look at the effectiveness of harm reduction strategies.

This paper was developed by a CAMH staff group. The group was made up of experts representing every major area of the Centre's addiction activities, to ensure that the perspectives of all parts of the organization, and the stakeholders with which they work, were taken into account. The staff group reviewed the literature on harm reduction and was also informed by the work that Dr. Patrick Smith did with the City of Toronto's Harm Reduction Facilities Working Group of the Homeless Health Strategy, a process involving broad community input.

Guided by practical examples of the application of harm reduction in their various programs, members of the group were able to reach consensus on a definition and guiding principles for the concept. However, the group acknowledged that harm reduction is not a "one size fits all" solution to addiction and other problems associated with drug use, but is one approach within a broader spectrum of client-centred services that also includes programs with an abstinence-based philosophy.

There was general agreement about the need to clearly articulate that harm reduction is not intended to encourage substance use, and that research and evaluation of harm reduction programs need to ensure that the strategies used are actually reducing harm.

We hope that this CAMH paper will help to inform the on-going debate about harm reduction. The background paper is comprehensive and includes a bibliography of available research. The executive summary is intended for a more general audience.

If you have any questions or comments about the paper, please contact:

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Yours sincerely,

Jean Simpson
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Attach.