

August 31, 2025

On August 31 we mark International Overdose Awareness Day, a time to remember those whose lives have been lost to the toxic drug crisis and to stand with the families, friends, and communities left behind. Since British Columbia declared a public health emergency in 2016, more than 16,000 people have died from toxic drug poisoning. They were human beings with families, stories, hopes, and fears, and their absence underscores the scale and urgency of this crisis. We honour their memory and extend our condolences to all who grieve.

The 2025 theme, *One big family, driven by hope*, reflects the need to stand together with compassion and solidarity. It recognizes that the overdose crisis touches every community, and that lasting change will come from collective action grounded in empathy and the belief that recovery and prevention are possible.

In British Columbia the crisis remains devastating, with roughly 1,000 deaths between January and June 2025, an average of about five lives lost every day. While men between the ages of 30 and 59 continue to account for most deaths, rates among women have also risen. No region of the province has been spared.

Despite years of public health efforts, the response to the toxic drug crisis has been shaped more by shifting political will than by what will truly save lives. Programs and treatment options have changed repeatedly with changes in government priorities, creating instability and gaps in care. The approach has relied too heavily on one aspect of the system, rather than building a coordinated, multi-faceted response that meets people where they are. As a result, many still face limited access to timely, appropriate care for substance use disorders, compounded by stigma and discrimination that drive them away from the very services that could help.

Naturopathic doctors are an important part of the solution to the overdose crisis. As licensed primary care providers, they offer a trusted and consistent point of access for people who might otherwise face barriers to care. Their longitudinal, relationship-based model builds understanding over time and addresses the full context of a person's health, including housing, income, chronic pain, mental health, and systemic inequities. By integrating physical, emotional, and lifestyle care, NDs help prevent crises, support recovery, and promote long-term wellness.

For people who use substances, or those in recovery, NDs can provide a safe, non-judgemental environment and evidence-based supports such as chronic pain management, mental health care for depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and anxiety, and strategies to address the underlying factors contributing to substance use. Extended visits and ongoing relationships enable NDs to build trust, foster adherence to care plans, and support long-term recovery.

Fear of judgement often keeps people from seeking help, particularly when past experiences in conventional healthcare settings have left them feeling dismissed or stigmatized. Removing barriers means ensuring that people can access care from providers they trust, and for some, that may mean choosing an ND.

BC's naturopathic doctors remain committed to working alongside other healthcare professionals to ensure that anyone seeking care in this province can receive it, without stigma or delay, from the provider of their choice.

*On behalf of the BCND Board of Directors*