

Location of MSIC

In December 1999, following the withdrawal of the Sisters of Charity Health Service upon advice from the Vatican, the NSW Government invited the Uniting Church of Australia to apply for a licence to establish and operate the facility.

A few weeks later two potential sites, which had been identified by the Sisters of Charity group, were presented to a community meeting held at St John's Church in Darlinghurst. One was in Orwell Street and the other on the corner of Hughes and Macleay Streets, Potts Point. Local residents reacted angrily, saying that these sites were too close to the more residential part of Kings Cross. They argued that the MSIC should be located in the more commercial part on Darlinghurst Road, where the shooting galleries had always operated and where there was most to be gained in terms of public amenity. Other advantages identified were that the main street was better lit and more policed than the residential areas.

While the Sisters of Charity Health Service had originally agreed not to consider sites on the main street at the urging of the Kings Cross Chamber of Commerce and Tourism, their representative at this community meeting, Mr Malcolm Duncan agreed to lift this quarantine. People got together after the meeting and formed a new residents group called the Potts Point Community Action Group, to advocate that the MSIC be sited away from the more residential area of Kings Cross.

The Uniting Church then invited various relevant community stakeholders to join a Community Consultation Committee to restart the process of site selection to now also include sites on Darlinghurst Road. This Committee included representatives of local residents, drug users, their families, the Chamber of Commerce and Tourism, other local health and social welfare services, police, local and state government. This Committee accepted with only minor changes the guiding principles for site selection previously established by the Sisters of Charity. These included the following.

- Floor space area of 150 – 200 square metres
- Useable space to allow sub-division as required
- Easy ambulance access Within 300 metres of Springfield Mall
- Ground level access front and back
- Acceptable to target population and other key stakeholders
- Positive ambience, natural light.

Data for the 12 month period to end 1999, showed there were 677 ambulance call-outs to the Kings Cross/Woolloomooloo/Darlinghurst/East Sydney area to heroin overdoses. More than 90% (621) of these call-outs were to places within 300 metres of the proposed site at 66 Darlinghurst Road, Kings Cross and 54% (335) of ambulance call-outs were to drug users who had overdosed on the street outside or in premises on Darlinghurst Road, Kings Cross.

The reason for this concentration of drug overdose cases in central Kings Cross was that this was where drug supply had always been most concentrated. It is well established that drug dependent drug users inject as soon as possible after they have procured the drug of addiction, mostly to overcome physical symptoms of drug withdrawal (“hanging out”), but also to avoid police apprehension for drug possession. Hence proximity to the street-based drug scene (focused around Springfield Mall at this time) was considered to be of paramount importance in site selection, just as it has been for other injecting centres established around the world.

These ambulance overdose call-out data showed that locating the MSIC elsewhere (away from Darlinghurst Road) would have significantly lessened its ability to meet its stated primary aim: to reduce death and injury associated with drug overdoses when they occur in un-supervised, back street situations. Furthermore, in order to reduce public injecting and the amount of publicly discarded needles, a significant proportion of the street-based drug users in the area had to use the MSIC, and so again, it had to be close by.

The St Vincent’s Hospital campus has been suggested at various times as a possible site for the MSIC, despite the much publicised need for the Sisters of Charity Health Service to withdraw their involvement in the MSIC initiative. However when still involved, the Sisters of Charity had excluded operating the MSIC from its hospital site, because of the distance from the heart of Kings Cross. Even in the unlikely event that drug users would walk there each time to inject, this would create an “ant trail” from central Kings Cross across the overpass and down Victoria Street, Darlinghurst to the hospital. This would bring pose safety and security issues at the hospital, where wards stock pharmaceutical drugs of great interest to drug users. It was also important given the particularly vulnerable community of St Vincent’s Hospital, being mainly elderly, and significantly unwell people.

In June 2000 the Uniting Church lodged its application for a licence to operate the MSIC. One of the requirements was that “sufficient community acceptance” of the chosen location be demonstrated. A further telephone poll at that time commissioned by the Uniting Church showed that a majority of local residents and businesses supported the MSIC being located at 66 Darlinghurst Road. The licence was granted in October 2000 and the MSIC commenced operations in May 2001.