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The price of politics



AN EMERALD EDITORIAL

Despite concluding needle exchange programs work, the federal government still won't provide funding for them

Perhaps Ann Hinds, HIV program manager for Outside In, a social service agency in Portland, put it best: "Politics makes me sick."

Hinds, quoted in Tuesday's Oregonian, was speaking metaphorically about the White House's decision to continue a ban on federal funding for needle exchange programs. But she might as well have been speaking literally.

Because of political fears, thousands of Americans may contract HIV, the virus that leads to AIDS, through the use of contaminated needles. This is sick indeed.

Two issues have historically hindered federal support for needle exchange programs. In 1989, when the ban was imposed, funding was made illegal until the government could demonstrate that such programs reduced the spread of HIV and did not increase drug use.

According to The New York Times, the government certified in February that exchange programs are effective. This comes after years of empirical evidence to that effect. Questions about the impact programs have on drug use remained, however.

The Times quoted Harold Varmus, director of the National Institutes of Health, as saying a review of assorted

studies produced "increasingly strong evidence" that needle exchange programs worked well in not only stopping the spread of HIV but also helping draw addicts into treatment.

In fact, according to the story in The Oregonian, at least six literature reviews, including one by the NIH, had demonstrated that exchange programs did not increase drug use. For his part, Varmus pointed to a Baltimore study in which half of the 3,000 addicts evaluated had sought treatment after participating in a needle exchange program.

Nevertheless, despite piles of overwhelming evidence, the federal government waited until Monday to answer the two questions raised about needle programs. According to Peter Lurie, a doctor and research associate quoted in the Times story, Clinton could have saved 17,000 lives during his time in office by funding needle exchange programs.

It gets worse, of course. Despite Monday's announcement, the government will continue to ban funding; hence the illness felt by Hinds and the inevitable deaths of thousands more.

According to the Times, Surgeon General David Satcher announced that 40 percent of new HIV infections in the United States are attributable, directly

or indirectly, to contaminated needles. Needle exchanges won't save all those people, and federal funding won't prevent needle exchanges, but if federal inaction affects even 5 percent of HIV infections, it is reprehensible.

How can Clinton justify not trying to prevent the deaths of thousands? Hinds has a clear understanding of the problem — politics.

Despite the overwhelming scientific evidence, conservative GOP leaders still lambasted the administration's announcement and vowed to never let federal money go to needle programs.

In The New York Times, Republican Sen. John Ashcroft called the scientific declaration "an intolerable message that it's time to accept drug use as a way of life." Ashcroft and others worry that needle programs send the message to children that drug use is acceptable.

This is so profoundly irrational as to be amusing — except that lives are threatened by the GOP's comical ignorance. Not only did the NIH's literature review determine that needle programs help decrease drug use, but the reality of needle programs is that they explicitly target existing users and are not widely publicized or romanticized, thus making it inconceivable that such programs would promote drug use.

The real "reasoning" behind the opposition to needle exchanges is the same as that behind opposition to medical marijuana and assisted suicide — any violation of the law by a common citizen must be punished without understanding or logic. This determined obedience to law for law's sake ignores the point of legal codes — to reasonably protect the rights of citizens. It isn't the law that needs protection; it is the basis for the law.

Needle exchange programs save lives. Anti-drug laws are at least intended to save lives. Therefore, anyone who honestly supports anti-drug laws ought to support needle exchanges.

If politicians aren't smart enough to realize that a preponderance of scientific evidence has rendered obsolete their archaic aversion to recognizing that anti-drug laws cannot be absolute, it is time to remove those obsolete politicians from power.

But of course, the shortage of smart politicians is affecting more than the spread of HIV. Politics is making a lot of people sick, and this is but one small example.

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses may be sent to ode@oregon.uoregon.edu.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Credit Progressives

Despite their carelessness with a few scheduling rules, their alleged "scare tactics" and their ability to piss a few people off, the Progressive slate deserves some credit for, if anything, creativity, unmatched endurance and sincere commitment. Are there any other candidates that organized a riverfront cleanup? Are there any other candidates that had a team of volunteers at the hunger cleanup? Are there any other non-presidential candidates with a strong platform and real issues? Not really. No other candidates have committed to protecting financial aid, saving green space on the river bank, promoting more awareness of sexual misconduct on campus and student control of student fees. In truth, no other candidates have shown more commitment to their issues and willingness to haul ass than the Progressive slate.

I believe in the slate, and I am impressed with their desire to be the best representatives of "the people" in student government. Support a revolution; support the student movement. Vote Progressive. Jessica Timpany, Corrie Nichols, Jerome Grzybowski, Spencer Hamlin and

Matt Swanson will rock your world once elected into student government. They are your best choice, unquestionably. Empower yourself. Empower your school. Vote for student rights. Vote Progressive.

Claudia Villena
Sociology

Slate platform solid

Recently there have been asinine grievances filed against the Progressive Slate. The slate has been penalized for having an unscheduled table with posters on it. The Constitution Court feels that just compensation for an unscheduled table is to make all the Progressive slate winners of the primary go back to the ballot, even if victory was in triple digits.

I ask that you as a student don't get discouraged by this decision that was motivated by a politically biased grievance. The slate is the only group of candidates (outside of Wortman and Cowling) that have committed themselves to a solid platform of issues.

Slate members are working to preserve green space on campus. By working with the City Council, administrators, faculty and students, the Progressive slate

will fight to preserve the green space north of the train tracks from development of the Riverfront Research Park. There is no need to develop the area north of the tracks, which is on the Willamette River, when there is an ample amount of land to utilize south of the tracks.

The slate sponsored a riverfront cleanup north of the tracks and invited all the ASUO candidates to attend. The people who pitched in were concerned students: Geneva and Morgan and the Progressive slate. I feel this is a good indicator as to where the other candidates stand on this issue.

You can count on the slate to be responsive to the student body. All members on the slate have vowed to work toward four key issues:

- 1) Stopping northern development of the Riverfront Research Park.
- 2) Increased support for survivors of sexual assault.
- 3) Access to higher education (more grants, not loans).
- 4) Student control of student fees.

The slate will be out all week to answer any questions you may have. You will know who we are. We are the candidates with

issues and soul. Your vote will make a difference in the general election. Vote student rights. Vote Progressive!

Michael Olson
Student Senator

OSPIRG helps campus

The "honesty" campaign against OSPIRG is one of the most dishonest attempts at strangulating student activism on this campus I've ever seen. Student groups, including OSPIRG, work on a wide range of issues vital to the public such as pesticides, Toxics Right to Know legislation, excessive banking fees and surcharges, as well as campaign finance reform. It shouldn't surprise anyone to learn that the University College Republicans have been actively taking part in the anti-OSPIRG campaign. While the Republicans rant and rave about nonexistent welfare queens and say not a peep about the \$350 billion in annual tax breaks and military-industrial boondoggles our government forks over to big business each year, last weekend OSPIRG raised over \$2,000 the good, old-fashioned way — dollar by donated dollar — to fund shelters and help the thousands of homeless and hungry in Oregon.

All the OSPIRG ballot question asks is if you're willing to give \$2.88 per quarter to fund work on accountable government, protecting the environment, consumer rights, waterway restoration and fighting hunger and homelessness. That's a tiny drop in the bucket compared to the \$500 students pay in incidental fees, but students get paid their money many, many, many times over in terms of improved environmental laws, better consumer protection and a more caring and civilized society.

The bottom line is, for the price of a cappuccino and a muffin, we students can do some very practical things that will benefit the entire society. No other student group represents such a wide range of self-evidently public interests on a statewide level. The real reason OSPIRG is under attack is because it's active, effective and really does represent the public interest, instead of the narrow priorities of the Wall Street money lords. Don't listen to the special interests of the rich — vote for the public interest of us all. Vote yes for OSPIRG!

Dennis Redmond
Campus Green Party