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# national news

## Dueling polls

Opponents fire more shots  
in the war over needle-exchange programs

by Bob Roehr

**T**he battle to lift the ban on federal funding of needle-exchange programs ratcheted up a notch with dueling news conferences in Washington, D.C., on Aug. 20.

Opponents of needle exchange cited a new poll showing that voters oppose removing the ban.

Supporters, meanwhile, pointed to evidence that finds needle exchange is an effective way to stem the spread of HIV.

Needle exchange is "a Band-Aid on a bullet wound," said Gary Bauer, president of the Family Research Council, a conservative group. "The only way to stop the spread of HIV among intravenous drug users is to step up the war on drugs."

He added that needle-exchange programs are "a wedge issue to gain drug legalization."

Dr. James L. Curtis, the septuagenarian director of psychiatry and addiction services at Harlem Hospital Center, argued "such programs, if proliferated, could lead to rapid escalation in rates of drug addiction and of AIDS."

He added that "an influential and well-financed small group of AIDS activists is misleading the American public to believe that needle exchange is a quick fix to the twin epidemics of addiction and HIV/AIDS."

The National Institutes of Health, American Medical Association, American Bar Association and U.S. Conference of Mayors are among the influential groups which have publicly supported needle-exchange programs.

Bauer also claimed that Donna Shalala, secretary of Health and Human Services, has been sending public "signals" that she is about to lift the ban.

Yet when pressed to explain what those "sig-

Mike Shriver of the National Association of People with AIDS joked that the Family Research Council will next call a news conference to announce that the earth is flat.

Bauer charged "some elites here in Washington, D.C., and some so-called experts are moving in the exact opposite direction [of public opinion]."

He said his group intends to make the issue "a major public policy priority in the months ahead."



Dr. Mohammad Akhter

On the flip side, Dr. Mohammad Akhter, executive director of the American Public Health Association, made the case for lifting the ban.

He said 90 percent of new cases of HIV infection in women, and 93 percent in children, can be traced directly or indirectly to injection drug use.

He added that most needle-exchange programs make referrals to treatment along with exchanging needles.

Akter also maintained that the dangers of discarded needles are greatly exaggerated. He said exchanging needles gives them a value—much like the deposit on bottles and cans—and hence provides an incentive to recycle and not to discard needles.

Jim Graham, executive director of the Whitman-Walker Clinic in Washington, D.C., talked about his clinic's needle-exchange program.

He called it "the magic bullet in AIDS prevention. It is the least expensive and one of the most effective means that we have of HIV prevention."

All of the 400,000 needles that the clinic hands out each year are labeled, and 97 percent are recycled back for new ones.

"We are keeping dirty drug paraphernalia off of the streets of the city," Graham said.

A woman named Winnie Fairchild spoke about the personal impact the program has had on her life.

"What is more important, my life? Your daughter's life? Your husband's life? Or a dollar bill? The people I was shooting drugs with, four of those five are HIV-positive today," she said. "Had a needle-exchange program been around when I was an intravenous drug user, I would not be a client of Whitman-Walker Clinic today."

The major media responded with a collective yawn, even in the dog days of August. The *Washington Post*, *New York Times* and even the conservative *Washington Times* carried no coverage of the events.



Gary Bauer

nals" were, he responded, "I don't have dates, places and times [but she is] favorably disposed toward this idea."

Bauer also hauled out a poll showing that 62 percent of Americans oppose needle-exchange programs.

A poll conducted in April for the Kaiser Family Foundation, however, showed 55 percent of Americans favoring such programs.

The Family Research Council's Robert Maginnis said the Kaiser poll assumed the efficacy of needle-exchange programs.

As for the council's poll, it in essence asked responders to evaluate the science and decide for themselves whether or not needle-exchange programs work.

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