

Face off: new needles for old

Needle exchange - the perfect solution to a prickly situation

Ben Maras
Editor-In-Chief

Every day in this country 38 people die of the advanced symptoms of AIDS. According to the Center for Disease Control, 35 percent of AIDS cases were reported to have been caused by intravenous drug use. Do the math and it becomes apparent that each day one person dies from shooting with a dirty needle. These are deaths which could be prevented.

The tactic used would be needle exchange programs, in which users are asked to exchange their old needles for new ones, old ones being disposed of safely. The growing methamphetamine problem is contributing to the need for such a program in Portland, which has long been known as a hot-bed of heroin use.

Many critics say exchange programs merely reinforce bad habits and give users an excuse to continue their destructive cycle. But herein lies the problem.

It has been shown through numerous independent studies that needle exchange programs do not encourage use, but merely work as a form of damage reduction. The psychological effects of addiction take control over the actions of the user.

There is reason to believe that paramilitary laws which include syringes do not deter use. They only make users more likely to engage in risky injection practices, because there is no alterna-

Additionally, exchange programs have shown to not only decrease dangerous practices by the user, but also encourage recovery. One study by the National Institute of Health concluded that "individuals in areas with needle exchange programs have an increased likelihood of entering drug treatment programs."

A very real danger in any city is the threat of improperly discarded dirty needles, which can often be discarded in the worst places, such as parks and playgrounds. While this is often treated as a joke, they can pose a real danger for infection of even more people. When exchange programs are implemented, the number of discarded needles decreases because they can be disposed of by professionals.

One often used argument is that HIV/AIDS is a method of natural (or supernatural) selection to rid the earth of the "dirty junkies," and that somehow the users deserve their disease because they brought it on themselves. The problem with this statement is that the social aspects are not considered.

Many of these people have families, often completely innocent of any crime. They can also have sexual partners, sometimes unknowing of the status. It is easy to dehumanize people who are different, but we must remember that every addict is a living, breathing person with dreams, hopes, friends and a family no different than you or I.

Right now the people of America are under the coercion of an archaic strangle-hold of a drug policy. Unless we do something to fix it soon we can only expect to see the repeated patterns which manifested during prohibition.

Within the next 15 minutes one new person will be infected with HIV because of a dirty needle. Their chance of surviving currently stands at zero.

"...needle exchange programs do not encourage use, but merely work as a form of damage reduction."

Primary problems persist in spite of progressive program

Derek Erickson
The Clackamas Print

Heroin is an increasing trend in the Portland area. Studies are showing that the age of users is lowering and the problem isn't showing any signs of going away. So what do we do to combat this issue? Why don't we hand out some free needles so heroin users can "safely" shoot up their smack, without worrying about infectious disease?

Heaven forbid these people see consequences for their actions outside of the law. The same studies that show the user age lowering also state that the method of using heroin has changed. The kids are smoking their junk, not shooting it. "Chasing the dragon" is a more acceptable way of administration amongst those who see shooting heroin as dangerous and dirty.

We have spent plenty of tax dollars talking about the dangers of heroin use, focusing mostly on the worry of infectious diseases, specifically HIV and Hepatitis. Thanks to the Portland needle exchange program, that fear has been removed from the heroin community.

Is it important to keep users from switching to needles? I mean, heroin is heroin right? Not quite. Shooting heroin is a far more potent and addicting method of administration. Overdosing while smoking heroin is nearly impossible, withdrawals are less likely to be lethal and addiction takes longer to grab a hold of the user.

Having talked to a number of heroin addicts, most of them stated that they began by smoking it. Eventually that wasn't enough and they knew that they could receive free needles down at the

exchange. So what did they do? They bought a pack of new needles to begin with, and then shared them for some time before they went to the exchange. These users still shared their needles due to lethargy, and then grabbed some new ones for free. They shared the needles because the needle exchange was too far away, it was inconvenient to shield themselves from infectious diseases. So we're paying for a program that is only used some of the time.

If users are still sharing needles, only using the needle exchange for them, then what's being prevented here? HIV is still being spread amongst users. They're still overdosing. They still steal, rob and do whatever it takes to get the drug. The only difference is that when they're near the exchange they can pick up some nice new sharp syringes and trade in the ones that

they have used until they don't function anymore.

I'm no Darwinist, but even if the needle exchange worked as intended, who are we saving? We're saving heroin addicts who have most likely ignored legal implications, countless rehabilitation program and cries from friends and family. These former human beings have given up who they are for a cheap high that used to seem scary to those who didn't indulge with them. The fear is gone, the high remains, the diseases aren't going away and we're all paying for it in one way or another.

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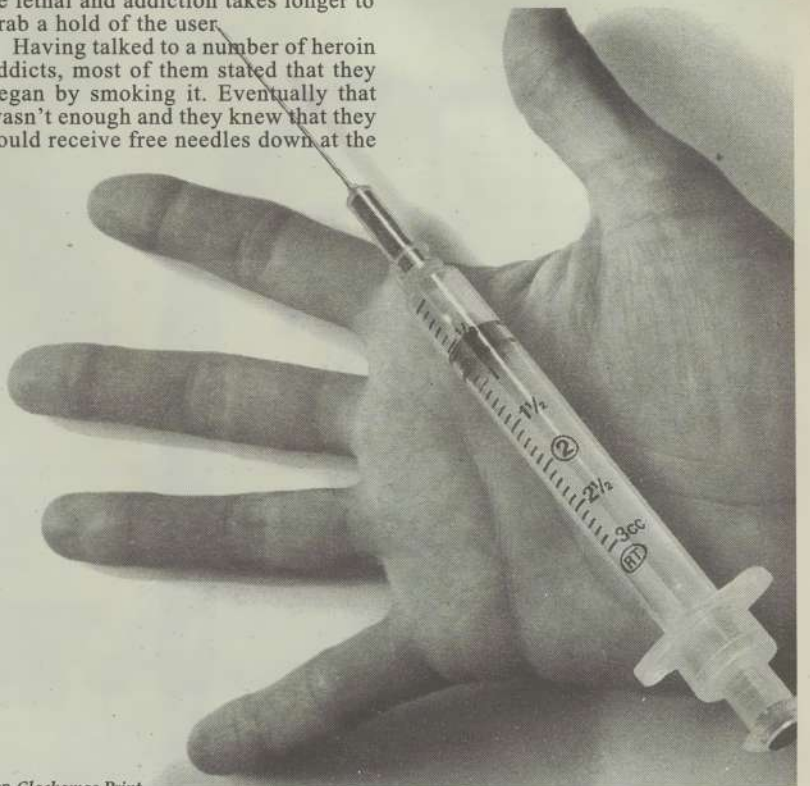
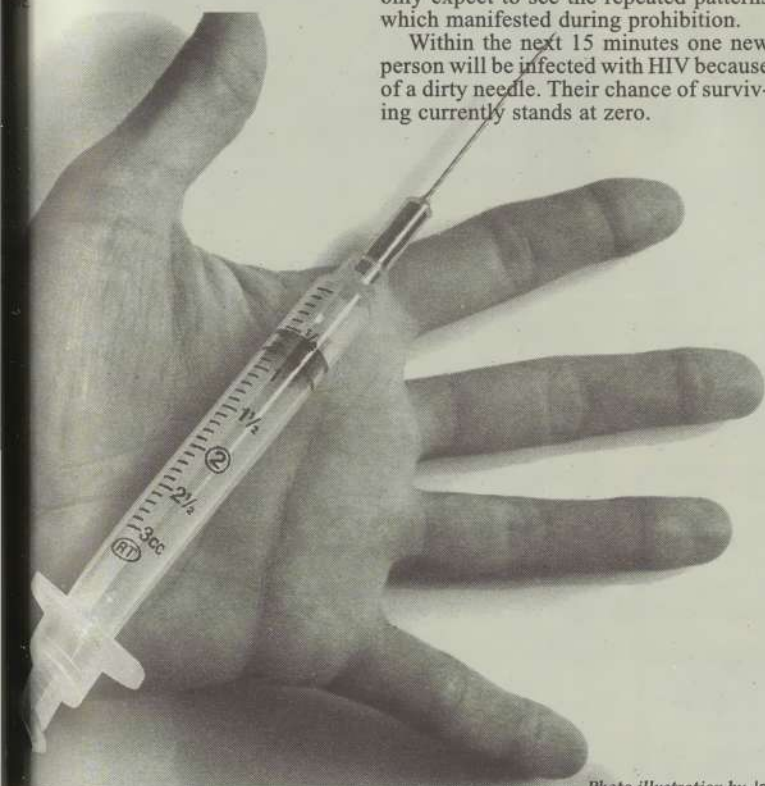


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