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THE NATION

Needle exchanges still stir debate

Programs slow AIDS, but some say bad message is sent

By Gary Fields
USA TODAY

Respected organizations such as the American Bar Association and American Medical Association have endorsed needle-exchange programs as a way to combat AIDS.

But critics, including the Clinton administration, say such programs encourage drug abuse and send the wrong message to the nation's youth.

In 29 states and the District of Columbia, 112 programs provide intravenous drug users with clean syringes. A soon-to-be-released report by the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials says more than 14 million syringes were distributed in 1996.

The exchange programs were established after a link was found between the sharing of needles by intravenous drug users and the transmission of blood-borne diseases and the virus that causes AIDS.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, 36% of the 573,000 cases of AIDS among adults reported through December 1996 were the result of intravenous drug use.

In addition to reducing the incidence of AIDS, supporters of needle-exchange programs say the practice also brings drug abusers into regular contact with counselors, who often can steer them into drug treatment programs.

But opponents say that providing free syringes to addicts only encourages the addicts to continue using drugs and also suggests that such drug use is acceptable.

Most states require prescriptions to buy syringes, which typically are used by individuals to inject themselves with insulin and other prescription medicines. Only Connecticut sells syringes over the counter and does not consider them illegal paraphernalia.

David Purchase of the North American Syringe Exchange Network says a study of a program in Tacoma, Wash., shows that the percentage of intravenous drug users who tested positive for HIV has dropped by a third since the program started in 1988. Purchase says the study also shows that those in the group now are four times less likely to contract hepatitis B and 65% less likely to be infected or reinfected with hepatitis C.

"We have scientific proof that syringe exchanges help reduce the incidence of HIV and other blood-transmitted disease," Purchase says.

The Family Research Council, a conservative family policy organization that lobbies on issues such as sex education, opposes needle exchanges.

On Wednesday, it released the findings of a survey it commissioned, in which 51% of 1,000 people surveyed said that they think the programs are irresponsible.

"The American people are saying, 'Look, Congress, we don't want this,'" the council's Robert Maginnis says. "We're all concerned about the AIDS epidemic, but it must be handled with good public policy."

Administration anti-drug czar Barry McCaffrey says that at a time when he is pushing for a $170 million ad campaign to keep teens off drugs, syringe exchanges send "the wrong message."

The federal government provides no funding for needle exchange programs. And only a handful of states provide funds. In most cases, the costs of the programs are covered by private organizations.

Contributing: Andrea L. Mays

Bruce - Needle exch.

FYI. I take it Duna called Erskine to complain. The result is a meeting during the week of the 2nd in Erskine's office with Duna, the General, Yon, Rahm, and Chris.

Elena