



Australian Hepatitis Council

MEDIA RELEASE

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First for Australia - needle exchange program for ACT prison

Simon Corbell, Health Minister for the ACT, has confirmed that a needle exchange trial is to be considered for the new ACT prison. This would be the first in Australia.

Helen Tyrrell, the Executive Officer of the Australian Hepatitis Council said, "The Australian Hepatitis Council, supported by all State and Territory Hepatitis Councils, congratulates the Health Minister and the Stanhope Government for their leadership and vision on this issue.

"The realities of the prison experience are that drugs exist in all prisons and blood-borne viruses like hepatitis C are transmitted through the extremely dangerous unofficial practice of sharing drug injecting equipment. It is therefore the responsibility of authorities to look at all possible ways to minimise the risks to both inmates and staff."

With up to one in every two inmates in some States having hepatitis C, transmission of the virus between prisoners is a major prison and public health concern. As the average prison sentence is well short of 12 months this becomes a public health issue for all Australians, as people move out of prison into the community.

Needle and syringe programs have operated in the community for many years and have been highly effective in preventing the spread of hepatitis C and HIV. Many health experts say that further gains won't be made until we address transmission within prisons. It is therefore imperative that needle exchanges are introduced into prisons across Australia as soon as possible.

There is clear evidence from Europe, where prison needle exchanges have been operating for over 10 years, to show that the safety of staff in prisons is substantially enhanced by the introduction of a carefully planned and controlled needle exchange. Staff needle stick injuries which previously occurred during cell searches are virtually eliminated and not one incident of a needle being used as a weapon against a prison officer has occurred. In addition overall drug use has not increased.

Ms Tyrrell says that the benefits of introducing such a program will be obvious to anyone who reviews the evidence. She hopes all members of the ACT Legislative Assembly will support the Minister on this important health matter.

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