Needle Exchange Programs (NEP) and HIV

An investigation of the evidence that needle exchange programs reduce the risk of HIV and other infectious diseases.

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Recent claims about HIV and NEP


- "a growing body of literature to support harm reduction interventions as a key approach to controlling the HIV epidemic" references Gibson (2001), Wodak (2005), DeBeck (2011). DeBeck is not relevant.


- "Harm reductions strategies such as needle exchanges have been demonstrated to reduce the risk of blood borne disease transmission among IDUs by providing them with a clean supply of needles" references Wodak (2005), WHO (2004), IOM (2006).
Choosing Studies

- Must bear on the risk of developing signs of a viral disease (HIV, Hepatitis B, C) with or without NEP.
- Must show a positive or negative impact of NEP.
- Must not be a repetition of another study.
- Must watch a specific group of individuals and not just watch trends over populations (epidemiology).
Getting to the data


Des Jarlais, 1996

- Most commonly cited paper.
- 3.5-5.8 times greater risk of becoming HIV+ in non-NEP users.
- Not a study, but a meta-analysis:
  - Included two current studies, one included only NEP users.
  - One historical data source included only non-NEP users.
- Major differences between the data sources in gender, race, age and frequency of injection.
- Short follow-up (6.5-9.7 months).
Both papers report on the same HIV outbreak in Vancouver among IVDUs in 1996/1997, with a NEP present.

Strathdee reports that 23 of 24 who became HIV+ reported that the NEP was their main source of needles.

Schechter reports, “Of 694 subjects [IV drug users], the 15-month cumulative HIV incidence [number of people changing from HIV-negative to HIV-positive] was significantly elevated in frequent NEP attendees (11.8 ± 1.7 versus 6.2 ± 1.5%).”

Despite this, Schechter concludes, “this observation about one particular needle exchange should not lead to the conclusion that all needle exchanges are ineffective.”
Bruneau, 1997

- A designed study with a single group under study: IVDDUs in Montreal, with NEP available.
- Rarely cited.
- Abstract excludes the most important findings.
- Table 5 shows the risk of becoming HIV+ is 10.2-22.9 times greater for exclusive NEP users compared to never-users!!!
Explanations of Bruneau

- Researchers have tried to claim that Bruneau was a bad study (even its own authors), without success.

- There are some indications that NEP users use more drugs than non-NEP users.

- HIV tests measure antibodies. The more foreign substances introduced to your body, the more antibodies (not just to the drugs themselves, but other components of street drugs).

- Could it be that IVDU are testing false positive on HIV and other tests due to years of exposure to highly impure and sometimes quite toxic street drugs?
Hagan, 1999

- A designed study (single cohort)
- Rarely cited
- Observed IVDUs in Seattle, with NEP available.
- Regular NEP users 1.81 times more likely to become Hep B+ than non-users. 1.3 times more likely to become Hep C+. No information on HIV.
- Earlier study in Tacoma found the opposite, but used a less reliable retrospective design.
Signs of bias

Why the bias?

‣ Bruneau is rarely cited, and then only in disparaging terms.

‣ Bruneau did not even report her own major findings in the abstract.

‣ Des Jarlais is always referenced, and often praised, despite its problematical (lack of) design.

‣ Vancouver researchers mostly vocal proponents of NEP.

‣ Schechter (1999) tried to turn his paper’s obvious conclusions on its head.
WHO is Wodak

- Wodak (2005) is often referenced, but this paper is not indexed, because it is in a journal supplement – sponsored and edited by another organization.
- WHO (2004) is also referenced by Fraser Health, but is also by Wodak (and the same co-author, Cooney).
- This means that the 3 Fraser Health references are really only 2.
- Wodak (2006) is an indexed paper, and would be a better reference, but it admits that the results of Monterrosso are not statistically significant. Wodak (2005) omits this awkward fact.
Wodak’s Padding

• Wodak (2005) claims that 6 out of 10 studies evaluating HIV seroconversion as an outcome found that NEP helped and 2 found the opposite:
  ▸ Des Jarlais (1996), previously discussed.
  ▸ Health Outcomes International (2002). “The study updates and expands a study previously undertaken by Hurley, Jolley and Kaldor” (see below).
  ▸ Hurley (1997). Compared HIV prevalence (not incidence) in cities with/without NEP.
  ▸ Monterrosso (2000) - results not statistically significant.
• Only one usable study actually looked at HIV seroconversion in NEP users versus non-users (Des Jarlais) and found a statistically significant result!
• So, in reality, only 1 study supports NEP usage and 2 provide evidence against.
Conclusions

- Research on NEP is contaminated by many researchers being proponents (and benefiting financially).
- Studies on NEP by health authorities are clearly biased towards NEP.
- Bruneau’s 1997 study must not be forgotten.
- Reasons for high rates of HIV+ in IVDU must include false positive HIV tests.
Disclosure

- I have never received funding for any of my research on HIV, AIDS or other scientific issues.

- I have been paid as a journalist for writing a small number of articles.

- My position as President of two related organizations is uncompensated.

- My employment is in telecommunications, and is totally unrelated to this issue.
Thank You!

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Data Sources


Supplementary Slide, not for Presentation

Other references

• Drug situation in Vancouver. UHRI. 2013 Jun.