

Harm Reduction Measures for IV Drug Users

By Allan Clear, Executive Director Harm Reduction Coalition

The impact of AIDS on the drug injecting community has been profound. But drug injectors have forestalled a much terrible tragedy by reducing the syringes they share, buying and possessing their own syringes, and by using syringe exchange programs where and when available. Drug users have shown that they are invested in their own health; they have access to sterile injection equipment, drug users show us that an unused, sharp syringe is preferable to a barbed, clogged and potentially contaminated one. Legal restrictions have not always provided drug users with the luxury of choice.

Despite gains in HIV prevention, 80% of injectors contract HCV; most within two years and many within six months of injecting. Holly Hagan's research in Seattle and Tacoma with injectors who use the syringe exchange programs, clearly shows that the message and practice of not sharing syringes is an ineffective strategy when it comes to HCV. At the recent "Bringing it all Together" conference in Baltimore, Steve Koester of Denver suggested placing a greater emphasis on drug sharing/dividing messages and Don DesJarlais suggested that the message is "avoid blood".

Both Steve and Don are correct and we are beginning to build a picture of HCV prevention for injectors. However, we need to talk less in terms of disease prevention and more about healthy injection practices. If we respond only to specific viral infections, one by one, we fail to normalize the acceptance of basic injection hygiene as common sense.

Blood and bleeding are a normal part of injection, and injection is a normal practice for many users. "Avoid blood" means a simple, day-to-day consciousness of how blood is present during injection, and simple day-to-day habits that respond to this reality. Conditions are seldom going to be perfect for injection, but drug users need to think of injecting along the same lines as preparing to eat dinner. Wash your hands and arms. Clear a space that is yours. Use clean surfaces. Make sure your injecting space is clean by wiping it down or spreading out a sheet of newspaper. (Hey, I always do that before sitting a meal).

Remember when you are getting off with other people, syringes look alike. Be sure you know which syringes are yours by marking them before you get off. Keep track of how you marked yours, and remember that markings can wipe off. Knowing which are yours is important if you recap your syringes.

Splitting drugs is an economic necessity for users, but also creates some risks for viral transmission. **Best practice: each person has their own syringe, and then an extra sterile syringe for actually splitting the drugs, if possible.** When preparing your shot use your own cooker. Clean out the cooker with an alcohol pad to be sure it's sterile. If you're drawing up from a sharing cooker, try to use only new syringes. It's a bad idea to draw up from a cooker if someone else stuck a used syringe in it.

Always clean your injection site by using an alcohol pad or soap and water. During the whole process of injection, be aware of what you touch or handle. After you've shot your drugs, apply gentle pressure to the injection site using tissue or cotton to stop the bleeding. Alcohol pads don't stop bleeding, the alcohol stops your blood from clotting. Dispose of the used cotton or tissue, and dispose of the syringe in a sharps container (or a hard, puncture proof container). **Be aware that you've been handling syringes, cotton, tissues and other materials that have probably contacted your blood.** Wash your hands and arms. Re-wipe your surface, check your tie and remember how your blood could have ended up on anything you might touch or use.

It is important to take control of your own injection. Having another person inject you significantly increases your chance of getting infected. But even when someone else injects you, basic hygiene can prevent most infections. If someone injects you after they have gotten themselves off, they should wash their hands, and use a sterile syringe, cooker and tie for you.

HCV is easy to acquire and transmit and it seems that very small amounts of blood will do the trick. Injecting drugs is the riskiest way to use, due to the variety of complications that can occur. But while some risks may be unavoidable, others can be reduced or eliminated through awareness and planning. Above all, it is time to recognize that hygiene can be a normal part of injection, just like it's a normal part of eating.