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Media Release

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For Immediate Release

AIDS & Prison Rights Groups Demand Further Action from Feds *Press Conference Monday Morning*

AIDS Community groups and Prisoner Rights groups welcome the recent announcement that condoms will soon be available in federal institutions, but say much more is needed.

The groups are responding to Solicitor-General Doug Lewis's October 30 announcement on condoms in prisons. Lewis also said syringes would continue to be denied prisoners. A day earlier, Health Minister Benoit Bouchard had endorsed condom and syringe distribution in prisons.

"The condom policy is long overdue," said AIDS ACTION NOW! spokesperson Glen Brown. "Everyone from community groups to the Royal Society of Canada to the Parliamentary Ad Hoc Committee on AIDS recognized long ago that denial of condoms to prisoners was a fatal, cruel practice."

The community groups are concerned about the implementation of the condom policy. "This needs to be done quickly and properly," said John Howard Society spokesperson Sherry Kulman. "We urge the government to consult with community groups on how to make this policy humane and effective."

The groups condemn the government's decision to deny access to clean syringes in prisons. They say the government should at least act immediately to provide bleach kits and education on their use to clean needles. "Needle-sharing is a fact of life in prisons," said Canadian AIDS Society president Joan Anderson. "There is no excuse for a policy that will in all certainty spread HIV infection."

Lack of health care policy for prisoners living with AIDS and HIV also angers the community groups. "Prisoners with HIV need access to treatment and care, and the regular corrections system doesn't provide it," said AAN!'s Brown.

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The groups are renewing their call for an AIDS Strategy for the federal prison system which would deliver AIDS/HIV education, prevention and treatment. The groups have offered to assist the government in developing the strategy. "Community groups have a wealth of expertise in preventing and treating HIV infection," said CAS president Anderson. "If this government is committed to saving lives, we're ready to help."

The groups will host a press conference to explain their position on Monday, November 4 at 9:00 a.m. at the 519 Church Street Community Centre. Appearing at the conference will be representatives from AIDS ACTION NOW!, the AIDS Committee of Toronto, the Canadian AIDS Society, the Elizabeth Fry Society, the John Howard Society, the Prisoner AIDS/HIV Support Action Network, PWA Foundation of Toronto, Street Outreach Services and Youthlink Inner City.

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Shared needles put prisoners at AIDS risk

Workers say plan to hand out condoms will help but it's not enough

BY MIKE MARTIN

Special to The Globe and Mail

TORONTO — Although a new policy of handing out condoms to inmates will help curb the spread of AIDS, drug users in prison still face a high risk of getting the disease by sharing needles, AIDS workers and community groups say.

The policy, announced by Solicitor-General Doug Lewis last week, has been long awaited by AIDS prevention groups. It should cut down the spread of AIDS through sex between prisoners, said Glen Brown of the Toronto group, AIDS Action Now!

But the government plan does not include handing out clean syringes to inmates and Mr. Brown said this remains an acute concern. Providing syringes would reduce the chances of spreading AIDS among prisoners who share needles for injecting drugs.

"You won't find anyone who will deny there is drug use involving shared needles in prison," he said.

The government's plan is a reversal of the Conservative's previous policy. The announcement didn't say when the plan will begin or how the condoms will be handed out.

The government refuses to hand out needles because it does not want to promote illegal drug use in prisons.

Andrea Reisch Toepell of the John Howard Society says two studies of inmates conducted in Quebec in the late 1980s found that 7 per cent had contracted the AIDS virus. She said that based on these studies, researchers can estimate that 935 of the more than 13,000 inmates in federal penitentiaries have the AIDS virus. Ms. Reisch Toepell said the studies, conducted by Dr. Catherine Hankins of Montreal, are the only

such tests that have been done in Canada. The anonymous tests were not mandatory for the inmates, so the number of detected cases represents a minimum.

Sherry Kulman, executive director of the John Howard Society, said the condom program is a good start but the government must adopt an overall strategy including education, syringe distribution and counselling if it really wants to combat the spread of AIDS in prison. She said inmates should get the same AIDS prevention and treatment provided to the public.

Globe Nov 5

Star Nov 5

Guard abhors needles for inmates

BY ROD MICKLEBURGH
Health Policy Reporter

The mere thought of providing clean needles to federal inmates who inject drugs makes Wayne Crawford, a prison guards' representative, recoil in horror.

"A needle is a weapon. I'd hate to even think about some prisoner coming up and stabbing me, or injecting me with his blood if it's infected," said Mr. Crawford, executive secretary-treasurer of the Union of Solicitor-General Employees, a component of the Public Service Alliance of Canada.

"Whether it's rusty or new hardly matters. The whole idea is ridiculous. It would be the same as giving bank robbers normal bullets so they won't use dum-dums. People talking about this aren't in the real world."

Despite Mr. Crawford's reaction, the establishment of needle-exchange programs for inmates as a means of preventing the spread of the AIDS virus in federal prisons is emerging as a major goal of AIDS and prison-rights activists.

(Intravenous drug use with contaminated needles and unprotected anal intercourse are considered the two most prevalent methods of transmitting the AIDS virus. Both activities are considered commonplace in federal prisons.)

"Drug use in prisons is a fact of life, and the denial of clean needles to prisoners is a policy of *de facto* capital punishment," Glen Brown of AIDS Action Now! told a news conference in Toronto yesterday.

A needle-exchange program, which would be unprecedented in North American prisons, has been ruled out by federal Solicitor-General Douglas Lewis, who said it would condone illegal drug use.

Activists rejected the guards' contention that clean needles pose a security risk.

"In fact, it would probably reduce the risk by eliminating dangerous, handmade syringes that have to be hidden within the prison," said Laurie Edmiston, a street worker. "If the issuing of needles was more open and protected, there would be less concern about violence and security."

At the very least, activists called for bleach to be made available within prisons so that inmates can disinfect their own needles.

Diane Rothon, medical director for British Columbia prisons, said she believes that political unpalatability makes it unlikely that needles will ever be freely provided in jails, but she said there should be far less of a problem with bleach.

"You may either make it available covertly, in a laundry room or something, or you could hand out a bottle of bleach to every prisoner as they come in," Dr. Rothon said.

Inmates need needle exchange, groups say

By Moira Welsh
TORONTO STAR

AIDS activists are clamoring for more prison reforms despite Solicitor-General Doug Lewis' announcement that condoms will be distributed in federal penitentiaries.

Inmates in Canada's federal and provincial prisons need needle exchange programs and bleach kits to sterilize used syringes. AIDS activists representing five community and prisoners' rights groups told a news conference yesterday.

Prisons also need better AIDS prevention and treatment programs, they said.

Lewis' announcement last week was "a small step in the right direction," said Glen Brown of AIDS Action Now. "There are many steps left."

Unprotected sex and the use of dirty needles are two major factors in the spread of AIDS.

Lewis has ruled out needle programs in federal prisons, saying that would be condoning illegal drug use. He expressed fears the needles would be used as weapons by prisoners.

Brown disagreed. Drug use, like sex, is a "fact of life" in prisons, he said.

"In fact, it's probably more prevalent. For health care purposes there must be clean needle distribution or, at least in the immediate sense, the distribution of bleach kits and an education program regarding their use," Brown said.

A University of Toronto study found many prisoners shared needles only while incarcerated, he said.

Since 1985, two federal prison inmates have died of AIDS.