

## A Weekly FAX from the Center for Substance Abuse Research

University of Maryland at College Park

### ***Study Estimates That Establishing a National Needle Exchange Program in 1987 Could Have Reduced the Rate of HIV Infections by at Least 15%***

HIV infection among injection drug users (IDUs) in the United States has been growing rapidly since the late 1980s. In fact, one study estimates that nearly 50% of new HIV infections each year now occur among IDUs.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, another study asserts, "the prevention of HIV transmission among IDUs should be a cornerstone of any attempt to stem the HIV epidemic in the USA" (p. 604). That study, published last month in the British journal, *The Lancet*, estimates that the HIV incidence rate in the U.S. could have been decreased by 15% to 33% had a national needle exchange program been implemented during the early stages of the AIDS epidemic. In other words, an estimated 4,000 to 10,000 HIV infections could have been prevented between 1987 and 1995. These estimates were derived from a statistical model that accounted for the effectiveness and level of use of existing needle exchange programs.

Needle exchange programs provide sterile needles to drug users so that they do not have to share needles or reuse them. At least six states have allocated funds for needle exchange programs, including Maryland. In 1994, Baltimore City began its first needle exchange program and last month the Maryland General Assembly approved a bill that will allow the program to continue indefinitely. In the District of Columbia, the Whitman-Walker Clinic, which operates the area's largest AIDS clinic, was recently awarded a contract from the D.C. government to establish a needle exchange program.<sup>2</sup>

The authors of the *Lancet* study estimate that the continued absence of a national needle exchange program in the United States could result in an additional 5,200 to 11,300 preventable HIV infections by the year 2000. For more information, contact Dr. Peter Lurie at 415-597-9100.

<sup>1</sup>Scott D. Holmberg, "The Estimated Prevalence and Incidence of HIV in 96 Large US Metropolitan Areas," *American Journal of Public Health*, 1996, 86(5):642-654.

<sup>2</sup>Amy Goldstein, "Study Finds Needle Swap is Imperative," *The Washington Post*, March 10, 1997, B1.

SOURCE: Peter Lurie and Ernest Drucker, "An opportunity lost: HIV infections associated with lack of a national needle-exchange programme in the USA," *The Lancet*, 1997, 349:604-608.

### **NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH AGENCY OFFERS RESEARCH GRANTS**

NIH's Agency for Health Care Policy and Research, under its Small Project Grant Program, will fund projects (up to \$50,000) researching health-care service issues. The Public Health Service grant application form, PHS 398 (rev. 5/95), will be accepted on a continuing basis for these grants. For more information, contact Jill Bernstein at 301-594-1455.