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Doctors criticize free hypodermics

By MICHELLE M. MURPHY

Doctors and social workers who treat intravenous drug users—the second-largest group at high risk of getting AIDS—are critical of a suggestion by City Health Commissioner David Sencer that hypodermic needles be made available without prescription in an effort to control the spread of the virus.

Medical experts say that the spread of AIDS—as well as hepatitis and other infectious diseases—would definitely decline if IV drug users were provided with sterile needles. According to the national Centers for Disease Control, 17 percent out of the 6,944 people who have died from AIDS were IV drug users.

But the same experts say that neither addicts nor occasional IV drug users would be likely to use the needles, even if they were free, because of the common practices of the drug culture.

“My understanding is that the normal practice in drug circles is to share the needles,” says Noell Sexton, administrator of the Allergy and Infectious Disease Divisions of St. Luke’s/Roosevelt Hospital Center. “It’s almost like the etiquette of the group.”

Needle-sharing is also easier and faster, according to Marie Marciano, a social worker at Beth Israel Medical Center, which treats 7,200 patients in its methadone maintenance treatment programs. “The first drive among these people is to get high or feel better. They are not hygiene-conscious. Their need is to get the drugs, period.”

And she added that every nonprescription needle that becomes available “would be another potential dirty needle.”

Sencer had recommended to Mayor Edward I. Koch that in New York, as in a number of other states, disposable needles be made available over the counter. Koch rejected this proposal earlier this month.

Because of the secrecy surrounding drug use, IV users would not be likely to reveal themselves to obtain sterile needles, according to Dr. Stephan Sorrell, director of the Substance Abuse Program at Roosevelt Hospital.

“These people are breaking the law [with their habits],” he said. “I have heard some of them say that no matter what they’re told, they’re convinced that a program like this would represent some method of entrapment.”

Sexton pointed out that occasional IV drug users might be especially reluctant to come forward.

“The first few times a person uses IV drugs it’s almost always a social thing—peer group pressure at a party, for instance,” said Sorrell. “And in these cases, the drugs are often injected by someone else who shares the needle.

“Later, as the level of addiction becomes more profound, the person is more likely to shoot up by himself,” he added.