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CU doctors divided on needles-for-addicts

By Gail Javitt

A proposal to distribute hypodermic needles to drug addicts in an attempt to reduce the spread of AIDS is drawing both praise and criticism from doctors at Columbia-affiliated hospitals.

The Cuomo administration recently approved a pilot study which would distribute needles to heroin addicts on a temporary basis.

The Cuomo-approved study will involve 400 of New York City's 200,000 IV drug users currently on waiting lists for drug treatment programs, according to New York City

Department of Health Representative Sam Friedman.

The participants agree to submit to HIV tests before and after the study, and must receive counseling, Friedman said.

While religious leaders like John Cardinal O'Connor condemn the study on moral grounds and law enforcement agents claim it condones the use of illegal drugs, many health officials stress that its efficiency must be tested in the struggle to stop the spread of AIDS.

"I congratulate the [Cuomo] administration for taking a very controversial stand," Dean of Columbia's School of Public Health Dr. Allan Rosenfield said. "It's [the study] is something that needs to be tried."

Jay Dobkin, a doctor at Columbia

Presbyterian Medical Center's Infectious Disease Division, compared the study to the safe-sex campaign promoted to combat HIV transmission.

"If you can't stop using drugs, which society has not been very effective with, [then you] can lower the risk of getting or spreading AIDS," Dobkin said.

"AIDS has got to be approached as a public health problem," he added.

Associate Dean of Harlem Hospital Edward Heaton said that while he approves of the study, more should be done to address the larger problem of drug abuse, including an expansion of treatment programs such as methadone clinics. He said that the needles-for-addicts program is reasonable when viewed as an ex-

periment, since it will be coupled with counseling and education about how to prevent the spread of AIDS. Heaton asserted that the study does not condone drug use.

But, several other Columbia-affiliated health officials condemned the program, claiming it encourages drug addiction.

Director of the Department of Psychiatry at Harlem Hospital Dr. James Curtis said he is vehemently opposed to the study.

“The whole program is one that cannot be dignified as scientific research,” Curtis said.

In last week’s issue of the **New York Amsterdam News**, Curtis and others wrote a letter blasting the needles-for-addicts study, on the grounds that it “would condone and possibly encourage further drug addiction, would discourage them [addicts] from seeking treatment, would certainly frustrate law enforcement, and would actually encourage the criminal behavior necessary to obtain and use illegal drugs.”

Curtis said that to stop the spread of AIDS, the commissioner of health should declare it a sexually transmitted and communicable disease, such as syphilis and tuberculosis.

Such a classification would allow the disease to be tracked epidemiologically, he said.

The health department would then be able to issue warnings about people known to have been exposed to HIV in order to rapidly identify and counsel them, Curtis said.

Curtis said he also advocates mandatory testing of all hospital patients who are considered at high risk for having or contracting HIV, accompanied by counseling and education.

According to Curtis, lack of a mandatory AIDS test is a “manufactured impediment to

the delivery of public health practice [and] prohibits physicians from practicing good medicine.” Many high risk patients have no basis for requesting the test, so they may carry the virus without realizing it, Curtis said. He said confidentiality could be maintained, since it is a “standard order of practice” for health professionals.

According to Friedman, the future of AIDS transmission is tied to IV drug abusers, who not only represent a threat to themselves but also to their female sexual partners and children.

According to Friedman, there are now 1400 women in New York City with AIDS, and 25 percent of these women are sexual partners of men at risk for HIV. Most of these men are heterosexual drug abusers, Friedman said.

Friedman said the purpose of the study is to examine whether distributing needles to heroin addicts will reduce the rate of HIV transmission, and whether such a program encourages or discourages needle sharing.

While data has been collected from studies conducted in Europe, no data on needle exchange programs currently exists in North America, according to Friedman.

“If this could be a tool for slowing the spread of AIDS then we need that tool,” he said.

Friedman also addressed the claim that the program would lead to an increase of users and the amount of drugs available. According to Friedman, similar programs in Europe are associated with a lowering of abuse among participants. However, “Amsterdam is not the Bronx,” he said, explaining that data from two studies might not show the same results.