



MEDIA RELEASE

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Call for needle exchange programs in prisons

Needle exchange programs need to be considered for Australian prisons to help stop the spread of hepatitis C, according to a Deakin University health researcher.

Dr Emma Miller said the results of her research into hepatitis C infection in South Australian prisoners suggested that needle exchange programs should be considered for all prisons.

“Around 42 per cent of all the prisoners taking part in this study, and nearly 60 per cent of female prisoners, had hepatitis C on entering prison. This is a startling statistic given that only 1.5 per cent of the Australian population is infected,” Dr Miller said.

The research, which is soon to be published in the *International Journal of Infectious Diseases*, found that inmates who already had hepatitis C on entering prison were significantly more likely to commence injecting drugs during their incarceration, and that needle-sharing was common in this group.

“This suggests that each needle currently in circulation within the South Australian prison system will almost certainly be contaminated with the hepatitis C virus. It is entirely likely that this would also be the case in prisons around Australia.

“This has serious implications for prison staff and also for susceptible prisoners,” Dr Miller said.

Hepatitis C is a virus that affects the liver and is spread by blood-to-blood contact, often through unsafe injecting practices. In 30 per cent of untreated people with chronic infection, it can lead to scarring of the liver. In some of these individuals, the scarring can be severe and may even progress to cancer.

Dr Miller said other studies had suggested that one needle in the prison system could be used up to 100 times and by multiple different inmates.

“The current zero tolerance in Australian prisons toward the introduction of a needle exchange program increases the danger for people not infected already,” Dr Miller said.

She said other countries such as Scotland and Germany were trialling needle exchange programs in prisons, and Australian governments needed to formally consider such trials – as Canada is seriously doing.

“South Australia has a good methadone program in its prison system but we need to think more pragmatically and also consider a needle exchange program.”

Dr Miller, who is a lecturer at Deakin’s School of Health and Social Development, conducted the study as part of her PhD in Medicine at the University of Adelaide.

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Dr Emma Miller is available for interview and can be contacted on (03) 9244 6136.

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