

AUSTRALIAN INJECTING & ILLICIT DRUG USERS LEAGUE (AIVL)

Issues Relating to Retractable Syringes from the Drug User Perspective

1. Cost:

By any measure, retractable syringes will be an enormously expensive option to purchase and to implement. Australia currently runs one of the most effective and cost-efficient NSP blood borne viruses prevention programs in the world. Currently Australian NSPs either distribute Terumo or BD 1ml syringes at the cost of less than ten cents per unit. By comparison, current estimates for the bulk of available retractable syringes average at approximately seventy-five cents per unit. At this price, we are potentially talking about tens of millions of dollars just to operate a retractable syringes program for one year at the current level of thirty million syringes distributed. This would mean an increase of almost 700 percent on the cost of operating the current national NSP program. One of the major concerns raised by retractable syringes is that they could turn a program that is extremely effective both in terms of cost and disease prevention into an expensive program, and perhaps more importantly, into a program that is not as effective when it comes to the prevention of blood borne viruses.

2. Harm Reduction and the Prevention of Blood Borne Viruses:

a) Re-use and Cleaning:

When it comes to the reduction of harm and in particular, the prevention of blood borne viruses such as HIV and hep C, there are some serious question marks surrounding retractable syringes. One of the biggest issues is in relation to the re-use of the retractable units. Despite claims by manufacturers that the retractable devices cannot be re-used, AIVL is yet to see a retractable syringe that is not able to be put back together for re-use following retraction. When these devices are put back together, the mechanism is not usually fully functional. This means that although it is possible to re-use the unit it is not functional enough to be cleaned, or at least cleaned properly. While AIVL does not encourage users to re-use fits whether they have been cleaned or not, we do recognise that re-using and cleaning of fits does happen. With retractable syringes we have a device that is possible to re-use, difficult if not impossible to clean and therefore, a greater risk of transmitting blood borne viruses. Furthermore, the potential difficulties associated with re-using and cleaning could lead to a resurgence of sharing of syringes as distinct from re-using syringes. The amount of blood present when a syringe is shared between two or more people is significantly more than if a syringe is cleaned and then re-used. While neither practice is ideal, a resurgence of syringe sharing as a result of a reluctance by drug users to retract the syringe in case it cannot put it back together, will have serious health implications for Australian injecting drug users.

b) More Injecting of Others:

When it comes to preventing the spread of blood borne viruses, the practice of injecting others is a very high risk activity because of the increased chance of blood being transferred from one person to another. In relation to retractable syringes there is a very real concern that the practice of injecting others may increase as people struggle to learn and to 'manage' the retractable mechanism. As well as this, even if people inject themselves any complications with the retractable device will likely result in people requesting assistance from others mid-way through the injecting process. Retractable

syringes then the risk undoing over ten years of harm reduction work and peer education strategies.

c) Veincare Problems:

Without doubt, one of the biggest problems associated with retractable syringes will be their lack of acceptance by drug users. If as AIVL predicts, large numbers of drug users reject the new retractable syringes, it is likely that there will be large scale re-using of the current needles and syringes. If this occurs, vein care problems associated with blunt needles and bacterial infections and abscesses from the use of unsterile equipment will dramatically increase. Not only will this be at a huge cost to the individuals concerned, but will also result in increased costs to the public health system.

3. Black Market Risks:

There are a number of very real concerns about the operation of automatically retractable syringes that, in AIVL's opinion, will almost certainly lead to large numbers of drug users refusing to use the new retractable syringes. It is critical that policy makers understand that the 'acceptability' factor cannot simply be dismissed or 'managed'. AIVL believes that large scale rejection of retractable syringes by drug users is likely to result in the development of a black market in the needles and syringes currently available within NSPs.

Black markets in injecting equipment have developed in the past when NSPs have made even minor changes to equipment access. A black market in the current needles and syringes effectively means that access to the means of preventing blood borne viruses will only be available to those who can afford to pay the inflated black market price. A worst case scenario would be the development of a black market in used syringes, which is not out of the question, particularly amongst the most marginalised and poor groups of users. Black markets in both new and used syringes have developed in countries where users cannot get ready access to the equipment they need. In many of these countries, the rate of HIV amongst injecting drug users is over thirty percent. AIVL does not believe that drug users should not be forced to access healthcare from the black market due to a lack of choices within the health system.

4. Community Attitudes:

AIVL does not believe that implementing retractable syringes will achieve the desired outcome of addressing community attitudes to publicly discarded needles and syringes. Negative community attitudes to IDU and the fear of blood borne viruses means that the sight of publicly discarded injecting paraphernalia creates great concern and fear amongst some in the community. This being the case, it is likely that whether the needle on a discarded fit is retracted or not will not make a difference to how the community reacts to the issue. Additionally, there is also the chance that people using in street and public injecting scenes, who are fearful of police, may see retractables as 'safe' to leave where they inject. Far from solving the problem, retractables could, in fact, create a much larger community and public health risk.

AIVL believes that the funding currently being proposed for the development and implementation of retractables could be used far more effectively, in terms of reducing publicly discarded injecting equipment, if it was used to implement a comprehensive approach to the issue including:

AIVL believes that the funding available for the development and implementation of retractable syringes would have a much greater impact on the issue of safe disposal if it was targeted towards a comprehensive education and action plan involving:

- A broad community education campaign;
- Targeted education for drug users and other users of needles and syringes on safe disposal strategies;
- Improving facilities for public disposal of injecting equipment;
- Infection control and safety training for workers who are coming into contact with publicly discarded needles and syringes;
- Further research into the barriers to safe disposal and small project grants to implement findings and reduce such barriers.

AIVL takes the issue of disposal of used injecting equipment extremely seriously and is very keen to work in partnership with governments, researchers, service providers and the community to develop effective strategies for reducing inappropriate disposal. AIVL has recently commissioned a major research paper on the issue of disposal seeking to gain a better understand of the circumstances and factors that lead to inappropriate disposal. The findings from this research will be used to inform better education for drug users, encourage local governments to provide more public disposal options and to support the need for a multi-faceted approach to this important community issue.