Policy Position Paper 8
Retractable Syringes

June 2003
Discussion

A retractable device is a combination needle and syringe where the needle goes back inside the barrel or ‘retracts’ when the plunger is fully pushed down the end of the barrel. There are generally two ways for the needle to be retracted:

- **Automatically**: when the plunger reaches a certain point as it is being pushed down, the needle is automatically activated to retract;
- **Manually**: when the person is finished injecting they push a small button on the top of the plunger or press the plunger down hard to the end of the barrel which ‘retracts’ the needle.

Retractable needles and syringes are not a new issue for Australia and have been publicly discussed since Needle and Syringe Programs (NSPs) have been in existence in Australia. The issue has been thoroughly investigated a number of times but because retractable have always been shown to have many negative and unacceptable health consequences for drug users, they have always been disregarded as a viable option. However, there is renewed interest in this technology among some parliamentarians coupled with pressure from the community on the disposal of injecting equipment and the vigorous lobbying by some of the manufacturers of retractable needles and syringes.

This renewed interest resulted in the Federal Government announcing in the 2002/03 Federal Budget that, “The Government will provide $27.5 million to fund a product development and implementation strategy for the introduction of retractable needle and syringe technology into Australia. Retractable needle and syringe technology will assist in reducing the risk of acquiring blood borne viruses from needle stick injuries.” This funding was appropriated over a four year period. Significant advocacy and lobbying was undertaken by AIVL and other stakeholders in response to this allocation of funding.

Subsequently, the Federal Budget 2003/04 adjusted this funding allocation by:

“redirecting funding of $8.7 million over 2003-04 and 2004-05 from the introduction of retractable needle and syringe technology to other Health and Ageing portfolio initiatives in this package which seeks to reduce the demand for illicit drugs.”

The budget stated that this was because:

“The original level of research and development funding for retractable needle and syringe technology is no longer required because there has been a significant increase in the number of commercial providers developing this technology. The Government will continue to provide $17.5 million over three years ($2.8 million in 2003-04, $2.6 million in 2004-05 and $12.1 million in 2005-06) to address community concerns about the risk of injury from needles discarded in public places through funding for the final phase of research and development, including pilots of the technology in selected settings and the

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1 Federal Budget 2002/03 Department of Health and Ageing
Such financial and political backing combined has made it so that retractable needles and syringes are now a real possibility in the Australian context. Retractable needles and syringes are largely a response to the perceived rather than actual problem in the community of the risk of blood borne virus (BBV) transmission risk from publicly discarded needles and syringes. While it is difficult to ascertain exact figures regarding the numbers of publicly discarded equipment around Australia, some estimates can be made from figures obtained through safe disposal hotlines and other mechanisms. From these sources it is estimated that less than one percent of equipment is being inappropriately discarded.

Recent research undertaken by AIVL through the “National Injecting Equipment Disposal Study 2002” showed that injecting drug users (IDU) are engaged in a range of different strategies to dispose of used injecting equipment and take this issue very seriously. It also highlighted that users often felt anxious about public discarding of used injecting equipment and felt forced into such behaviour when there were no other options. The most common reason cited for this was the fear of being arrested when carrying used equipment.

Stigma and discrimination associated with injecting drug use and a general fear of contagion, have led to a highly emotional response by some members of the community to publicly discarded injecting equipment. An empty swab packet or a water vial can bring on the same emotional response from some members of the community as an actual discarded needle and syringe. AIVL believes the current interest in the introduction of retractable needle and syringes in the IDU context is largely based on the erroneous belief that the general public is at high risk of contracting a blood borne virus (BBV) due to a needlestick from a discarded needle and syringe. In reality however, there is currently no documented cases of BBV transmission from a publicly discarded needles and syringe. In this way, retractable needles and syringes are attempting to ‘fix’ a non-existent problem.

Rather than leading to increased community safety in relation to BBVs, AIVL is concerned that retractable needles and syringes could lead to higher levels of BBV transmission due to the devices being unacceptable to injecting drug users. We are very concerned that design problems could result in people stockpiling and reusing the current non-retractable needles and syringes and/or having to inject others more often as people struggle to use the new technology. The cost of illicit drugs and dependency issues are likely to mean that people will be unwilling to use an unknown device if they think there is a chance of losing all or part of their shot or sustaining vein damage during retraction. In this context, most injecting drug users are reluctant to use a different brand of the same basic 1ml needle and syringe let alone shifting to an entirely new technology in the form of retractable needles and syringes.

In summary, AIVL believes parliamentarians, policy makers and community leaders must take responsibility for the current concerns in the community as they have neither ensured that drug users can easily and safely dispose of used injecting equipment or ensured that the public is properly informed on the actual levels of public disposal or the low risk levels for contracting BBVs from publicly discarded equipment. Retractable
syringe technology is now moving forward and is of great concern to AIVL, its member organizations and the people these organizations represent.

**Position**

- Retractable syringes will be an expensive option to both implement and purchase. AIVL is concerned that retractable syringes could turn NSPs that are extremely effective both in terms of cost and disease prevention into expensive and inefficient programs.
- AIVL is concerned about the potential for retractable syringes to be re-used and be not fully functional. This means that while the unit can be re-used it is less likely for it to be able to be cleaned sufficiently and will place users at great risk of BBVs. This in turn may lead to an increase in the likelihood in sharing of equipment by individuals who will be reluctant to let the device retract for fear of not being able to re-use it.
- Retractable syringes may increase the need for users to inject each other and this may increase the chance for the transmission of BBVs. This is because individuals may struggle to learn and manage the retractable mechanism. This has the potential for undoing over ten years of harm reduction work and peer education.
- Retractable syringes are unlikely to be accepted by injecting drug users who will not accept inferior or ineffective equipment. If as AIVL predicts that large numbers of individuals will reject this technology then the potential for the re-using of equipment will greatly increase. This will result in increased health issues for individuals such as hepatitis C and HIV transmission, vein care problems, abscesses and other bacterial infections.
- Retractable syringes have the potential to cause an emergence of a black market in the currently available injecting equipment. Black markets in both new and used equipment have occurred in countries where access to injecting equipment is limited or does not exist and is also the case in Australian prisons. Drug users are already forced to interact with the black market to access currently illicit drugs and should not be forced to do so to protect their health.
- Retractable syringes will not reduce community concern in relation to publicly discarded injecting equipment. This is because such concern is related to perception rather than reality. Negative community attitudes to IDU and the fear of BBVs means that mere sight of injecting paraphernalia creates major concern. The fact that there has never been a documented case of HIV or hepatitis C infection from publicly discarded injecting equipment seems to be irrelevant. Responses seem to focus instead on perpetuating stigma, fear and discrimination.
- Retractable syringes may in fact lead to more publicly discarded injecting equipment as IDUs may see them as safe to leave where they inject. This in itself will cause an even greater negative community response and will undo many years of work in relation to the disposal of used injecting equipment.
Recommendations

• That the Australian Government review funding of the retractable needles and syringes initiative and redirect it to:
  o Expand current NSPs;
  o Preventing the further transmission of hepatitis C and HIV among people who inject drugs;
  o Expand and increase the availability of safe disposal options for people who inject drugs;
  o Educate the public on the reality of the possibility for BBV transmission from publicly disposed injecting equipment alongside a campaign to educate the public on what to do should they find publicly disposed injecting equipment.

• That the Australian Government leads and assists the state and territory jurisdictions to:
  o Repeal the current laws that deter people who inject drugs from carrying and disposing of used injecting equipment such as self administration laws and safe disposal laws (in Qld only);
  o Create consistent national guidelines and legislation on the disposal of injecting equipment.

• That the states and territories undertake to positively advertise to general community the benefits of NSPs with the aim of increasing community understanding and support of this important public health initiative.

• That peer education is recognised as the primary vehicle by which to educate drug users on safe disposal and that drug user organisations be funded at the national and state and territory levels to carry out these roles.

• That constructive dialogue and education be initiated to engage the media to report appropriately on the issue of public disposal of injecting equipment and NSPs more generally. Should negative media occur that all Governments and other stakeholders respond factually and challenge sensationalist and inaccurate media reporting.