

The following information addresses the use of single-use syringes and why they are not recommended for distribution by harm reduction programs.

BACKGROUND

Harm reduction involves a range of support services and strategies to enhance the knowledge, skills, resources, and supports for individuals, families and communities to be safer and healthier. The provision of sterile needles and syringes to inject illegal drugs has been widely studied as an effective public health strategy. It has been shown to reduce the transmission of communicable diseases such as HIV and hepatitis C among people who inject drugs (PWID).

Evidence shows that needle distribution, as opposed to one-for-one needle exchange, leads to the reduction of HIV transmission. Therefore, harm reduction programs focus on ensuring that sufficient needles/syringes and other supplies are available, accessible and acceptable to PWID to avoid sharing. Agencies that receive harm reduction supplies in BC are required to implement a plan for the safe handling, transport and disposal of used supplies.

Single-Use syringes are also known as auto-disable, difficult to reuse, retractable and safety syringes. These syringes were primarily developed to prevent occupational needle-stick injuries or accidental syringe reuse among health care providers. Provision of single-use syringes for PWID sounds like a good idea. However, feedback from the harm reduction community reveals a lack of acceptability which will reduce use by the population and adversely affect the uptake of the needle distribution program.

ADDRESSING CONCERNS IN THE COMMUNITY

IMPLICATIONS WITHIN THE COMMUNITY:

- There is understandable public anxiety about the dangers of community needle stick injury infections and hence a perception of an exaggerated risk. Evidence suggests that there is a low risk of hepatitis C infection and no reported transmission of HIV following an injury by a needle discarded in the community. It is therefore important to emphasize safe disposal of used needles/syringes and inform the public how to safely dispose of syringes found in the community.

BY PROVIDERS:

- Single use syringes are more expensive than regular syringes, and may have financial implication on the long-term sustainability of the needle distribution programs. The BC harm reduction program distributed about 15 million syringes in 2016 throughout the province.

PUBLIC MESSAGE:

- Marketing of single –use syringes as the only harm reduction tool may convey a message to the public that PWID are not capable of good public health and thus may further reinforce shame and stigma among those who use drugs, and thereby disempowering and stereotyping the population. 15-June-2017.
- The campaign of single-use syringes can be seen as one more effort to minimize PWIDs ability to have input into their own needs.
- The language used by health providers or researchers such as “safety-syringe” may be misconstrued as some syringes are safe, while others are not safe or less safe. The public health message should be that any sterile syringe used correctly can prevent transmission of infection and it is important to provide appropriate disposal opportunities for used syringes.