

MEDIA RELEASE

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NEEDLE EXCHANGE IN ACT PRISON: PUBLIC HEALTH BENEFITS

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) has welcomed the ACT Government's decision to reconsider establishing a needle and syringe program (NSP) in the Alexander Maconochie Centre. PHAA believes the introduction of an NSP in the gaol would have far-reaching public health benefits for the broader community.

"Rates of injecting drug use among prisoners and the availability of clean injecting equipment need to be considered in the prison context because most prisoners spend relatively short periods of time behind bars and then return to their families and communities. Rates of blood-borne viruses among prisoners therefore impact on our ability to reduce their spread of in the broader community," explained Michael Moore, PHAA Chief Executive Officer (CEO).

"While the ACT prison has worked hard to deliver best-practice drug rehabilitation programs, there will always be some prisoners who choose not to engage with these programs at any given time. These people may well go on to engage in rehabilitation in the future, have families and live long and productive lives. It is vital that these people, their families and the broader community are protected from the spread of blood-borne viruses.

"PHAA supports a harm reduction approach to policy in relation to minimising the harms from illicit drug use. Harm reduction measures, such as the establishment of an NSP in the prison, coupled with complementary demand reduction and supply reduction measures, make up a comprehensive approach to addressing drug-related problems in both prisons and the Australian community.

"Unfortunately, research worldwide has consistently shown that despite the best efforts to ensure that drugs do not get into prisons, small amounts will slip through the cracks in the system and it is important that contingency plans are in place to deal with this.

"To deny prisoners access to NSPs could also be interpreted as a breach of human rights. The United Nations 1990 General Assembly Resolution on the Basic Principles for the Treatment of Prisoners (Article 9) states: "*Prisoners shall have access to the health services available in the country without discrimination on the grounds of their legal situation*". This cannot occur while prisoners are denied access to programs already in place in the community to prevent the spread of blood-borne viruses.

"The ACT Government, the Chief Minister and the Health Minister in particular, should be congratulated for taking a pragmatic approach in considering the implementation of an NSP to complement existing strategies designed to prevent drugs from entering the prison and the continued strong focus on rehabilitation," said Mr Moore.

For further information/comment:

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