

Medicine

AMA suggests giving drug users clean needles to cut AIDS spread

By KATHARINE Q. SELLYE
The New York Times

Lenon Wilson, a longtime heroin addict in Chicago with puffy scars the size of leeches on his arms, climbed into an unmarked silver van and unfurled a paper bag concealing 28 dirty hypodermic needles.

"If the van wasn't here, I'd use the same needle three, four, five times, even when it's dirty and has bacteria running through it, and then I'd use somebody else's when I couldn't use mine anymore," said Wilson, known as "Smoky," as he scooped up 33 clean needles in exchange for his 28. The volunteers for the Chicago Recovery Alliance at this mobile van in Harvey, Ill., 25 miles from downtown Chicago, like to give out a bonus of five to their regulars.

"You get a better hit with a clean needle, and it leaves less of a scar," Wilson said. "It's more hygienic all the way around."

It was people like Wilson that the American Medical Association had in mind Thursday when it joined a growing chorus of voices and called for a change in laws to allow intravenous

drug users easier access to clean needles to help block the spread of the human immunodeficiency virus, which causes AIDS.

More than one-third of the nation's new AIDS cases are caused by contaminated needles or sex with drug users. And drug users now account for the highest rates of new infection.

The medical association had previously encouraged needle-exchange programs. But Thursday, citing an "urgent public health need," it was broader and more emphatic.

The association's policy-making House of Delegates, meeting in Chicago, voted overwhelmingly to work with members of Congress to initiate legislation revoking the 1988 ban on federal financing for needle-exchange programs. The measure also strongly encourages state medical societies to initiate state legislation relaxing drug paraphernalia laws so users can legally buy and possess needles.

"There is more and more evidence that the advantages of needle exchange outweigh the disadvantages," Dr. Nancy Dickey, chairwoman of the board of trustees and president-elect of the medical association, which rep-

resents half the nation's doctors, said in an interview.

The association said that if the ban continued to the year 2000, the United States would have failed to prevent up to 11,000 cases of AIDS, including those among heterosexual partners of drug users and their children, at a cost of up to \$630 million for medical treatment.

Public health professionals applauded the association, saying that its action, combined with a similar bipartisan resolution from the U.S. Conference of Mayors earlier in the week, could increase pressure on the politically sensitive Clinton administration and a reluctant, conservative Congress to reverse the federal ban on financing needle-exchange programs.

Dr. Peter Lurie, a researcher at the University of Michigan who is one of the world's foremost experts on needle-exchange programs, said the public health benefits of needle exchange had been evident for years.

"If an infection is spread from person to person by an inanimate object, you can prevent it by removing that object," he said. "This is not rocket science."