

Prison-based needle syringe program doomed without Government leadership

The ACT Government is being urged to show political leadership and retain control over the introduction of a needle syringe program at the Alexander Maconochie Centre – ACT Prison in order to prevent the spread of blood-borne viruses.

Hepatitis Australia and Hepatitis ACT today urged Corrections Minister Shane Rattenbury not to allow the Community and Public Sector Union the right to veto the introduction of the planned needle syringe program, saying this would “spell the death knell for good public health policy”.

“This is a decision for Government, not public servants or unions. The stakes are simply too great to leave it to people who are not experts in public health policy,” said Ms Helen Tyrrell, CEO of Hepatitis Australia.

“It’s very simple – if a group of public servants are allowed to veto Government policy if they don’t like the implementation plan we can kiss good-bye to prison needle exchange in ACT, and possibly Australia,” she said.

“I urge the ACT Government to urgently reconsider their position. This decision sets a dangerous precedent which fundamentally undermines democratic processes by granting public servants a veto over the implementation of public health policies.

“What we need is strong political leadership, not a capitulation on good health policy.”

“If it wasn’t such a serious issue I’d suspect an April Fools gag was in play,” Ms Tyrrell said.

“Given the CPSU’s strident opposition to prison-based needle exchange this may be the death knell for this well-considered and researched public health policy,” she said.

“We know from overseas experience that prison needle syringe programs reduce the spread of blood-borne viruses, without increasing the risk of harm to prison guards.

“The ACT Government supported prison-based needle exchange in the lead up to the last Territory election and today says it remains committed to implementing a prison needle syringe program. It’s time to turn words into action – not hand over the reins.

“The ACT will rapidly become ungovernable if public servants start holding ballots to decide which of the Government’s policies they will implement,” Ms Tyrrell added.

Hepatitis C is a highly infectious blood-borne virus that is frequently transmitted through the sharing of injecting equipment. Prisons that introduce needle syringe programs report a significant reduction in transmission risks for blood-borne viruses, including hepatitis C.

Hepatitis C affects more than 230,000 Australians and is the leading cause of serious liver disease (cirrhosis, liver cancer and liver failure) in Australia. This year alone, more than 630 Australian lives will be claimed by hepatitis C-related liver disease.

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