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The Front Page

AIDS panel breaks ranks, backs free needles

By Joyce Price
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The government's AIDS commission yesterday recommended needle exchange programs for intravenous drug users and urged repeal of laws that restrict access to clean needles and syringes, putting it at odds with the Bush administration.

"Such legal barriers do not reduce illicit drug injection," the National Commission on AIDS said in its report on the "twin epidemics" of substance abuse and the human immunodeficiency virus, the agent that causes AIDS.

"They do, however, limit the availability of new/clean injection equipment and therefore encourage the sharing of injection equipment and the increase in HIV transmission," the panel said.

Such statutes are "obsolete and dangerous to the public health," said commission member Don C. Des Jarlais, director of research for the Chemical Dependency Institute at Beth Israel Medical Center in New York City.

The commission pointed out that nearly a third of all U.S. AIDS cases have been linked to intravenous drug use, and it vigorously attacked the federal government for failing to address that "insidious and indisputable link."

Health and Human Services Secretary Louis W. Sullivan is one of the commission's three non-voting members. Dr. Sullivan had no comment yesterday on the call for a relaxation of restrictions on the sale and possession of injection equipment. Twelve states currently require prescriptions to obtain nee-

dles.

"The department is opposed to needle exchange programs because such programs can be viewed as sanctioning drug abuse," a Sullivan spokesman said. "The administration consistently has conveyed the message illegal drug use is unacceptable and will not be tolerated."

Early in his tenure, Dr. Sullivan supported needle exchange programs, but he later reversed himself.

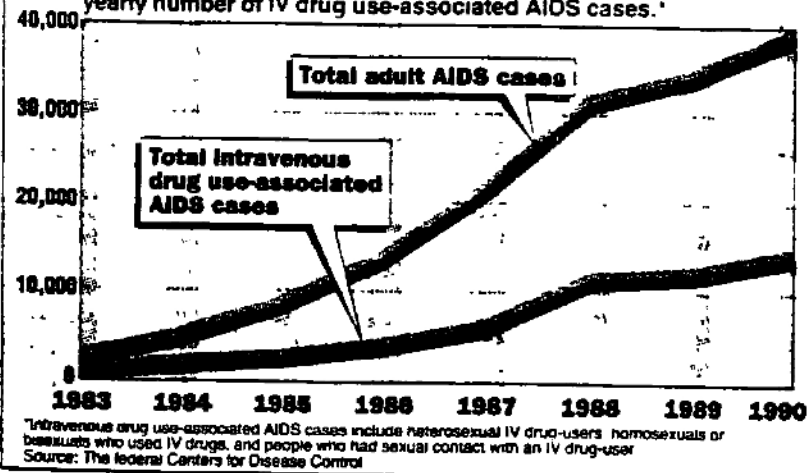
Gary Bauer, president of the conservative Family Research Council, said he believes the commission's recommendation to make needles more available to addicts would "undermine the drug war." He added:

Over the long term, it would result in more AIDS cases, not less."

see AIDS, page A9

CASE-BY-CASE

The total number of adult AIDS cases by year compared with the yearly number of IV drug use-associated AIDS cases.*



Map by Paul Woodward / The Washington Times

AIDS

From page A1

The 15-member National Commission on AIDS is an independent body created by Congress to advise Congress and the White House on the development of a "consistent national policy" for dealing with the HIV epidemic. Its members include 10 appointed by the House and Senate, two appointed by President Bush and three non-voting Cabinet members.

"No decision is built in concrete," Dr. James O. Mason, assistant secretary for health, said in an interview yesterday. But before there would ever be any change in policy on needle exchange programs, he said, "there would have to be clear evidence that such programs in no way encouraged or legitimized drug abuse."

Dr. Des Jarlais said in a telephone interview that "there is no evidence to support the claim that syringe exchange programs lead to increased drug injections."

The AIDS commission's endorsement of needle exchange programs came less than a week after Yale University researchers reported that a New Haven, Conn., program had reduced new HIV infections by more

than 30 percent in that area. "The New Haven study was one of 20 or so studies that have consistently found those results," Dr. Des Jarlais said.

But Bob Martinez, director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, said in a statement yesterday, "The most recent studies on needle exchange and today's report by the National Commission on AIDS all fail to provide clear scientific evidence that such programs reduce risk-taking behavior."

Federal legislation, passed in 1988, banned the use of federal funding to "carry out any program of distributing sterile needles for the hypodermic injection of any illegal drug."

But Dr. Mason noted that states and local communities are free to offer such programs under their own authorities. Needle exchange programs are in operation in several areas, including Tacoma, Wash., Portland, Ore.; Boulder, Colo.; and Hawaii.

Dr. June Osborn, chairwoman of the AIDS commission, yesterday described the proposal to give addicts freer access to needles and syringes "a stopgap measure" necessitated by the government's "failure to deal with people who want and need [drug] treatment."

The No. 1 recommendation, she said in an interview, is for "expanded drug abuse treatment so that all who apply for treatment can be accepted into treatment programs."

Dr. Osborn noted that an AIDS task force appointed by President Reagan had called for more drug treatment opportunities. "But the recommendation was not attended to," she said.

The National Commission on AIDS said in its report that the government's primary response to the drug problem "has been imprisonment and increased jail sentences, often ignoring drug/HIV relationships" and "neglecting the real public health and treatment measures that could and must be taken to halt the spread."

But Mr. Martinez charged that the AIDS commission's report "distorts the administration's position on expanding and improving drug treatment."

The "flash fire potential of HIV transmission through injection drug use has been demonstrated repeatedly in this country and around the world, and it is an issue of the greatest urgency," Dr. Osborn said.

HIV and intravenous drug abuse are "twin epidemics," she said, and at their worst could be "Siamese twin epidemics."