

AIDS and Drugs

THE NATIONAL Commission on AIDS, a politically appointed body created to help Congress and the administration formulate a consistent national policy on the epidemic, has just issued a report on the increasing coincidence of substance abuse and AIDS. The report is short on practical responses, but the figures it presents on its dimensions are startling. About a third of all adult and adolescent AIDS cases are related to drug abuse, whether caused by the reuse of infected needles, by sex with drug users who are infected or by unsafe sexual conduct while under the influence of drugs. Seventy percent of pediatric AIDS cases are related to maternal exposure linked to intravenous drug use. Blacks and Hispanics account for 71 percent of drug-related cases.

The commission rightly believes that the government must direct more attention to these cases, which are on the rise. But four out of five of its recommendations offer no blueprint for fast action. There is the perennial call for "better coordination" of efforts by the federal government, the universal demand for more research money and the always-to-be-hoped-for treatment that is not only available on demand but in convenient locations for all addicts. Even more lofty is the injunction to eliminate all social problems—poverty, dilapidated housing, poor nutrition and lack of access to medical care—"that promote licit and illicit drug use in American society." No one will argue with those goals, but surely there are practical steps that can be

taken more quickly to address the connection between AIDS and drugs.

The commission does offer one such step that is likely to cause a furor: the removal of all legal barriers to the purchase and possession of drug injection equipment. Ten states and the District of Columbia have laws requiring prescriptions for purchase of syringes. The list includes a number of jurisdictions—California, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and the District—where drug-related AIDS is a major problem. In many additional states, according to commission member Don DesJarlais, possession of any kind of drug paraphernalia can be prosecuted. These laws inhibit the distribution of clean needles and of bleach vials that help to reduce the sharing of dirty needles. Does a decrease in needle-sharing reduce the incidence of AIDS? The report does not provide an answer, but Dr. DesJarlais cites studies conducted in England and Sweden and experience in such cities as Seattle, San Francisco and New Haven that suggest this approach works.

There are valid objections to government sponsorship of programs such as clean-needle distribution or giving out condoms in prison, which appear to condone disapproved or illegal activity. These are not easy decisions to make, but they are necessary in this crisis. This commission recommendation might at least help control the spread of the virus in this high-risk population.