

DON FEDER

The real message of needle exchange is 'Say yes to drugs'

Damn all national commissions, presidential panels, advisory task forces, and other founts of august idiocy.

Such bodies are eight-cylinder vehicles for academic airheads and special interest warriors with an ideological agenda to legitimize. Put them on a commission, give them a mandate, staff, and funding and faster than Pee Wee Herman can expose himself to ridicule they'll cook up a report validating some screwball position or other.

The National Commission on AIDS wants to fight the infection among addicts by handing out clean hypodermic needles. The excuse for its recommendation is the just-released preliminary report of the City of New Haven Needle Exchange Program, which claims prodigious progress.

It touts a 40 percent retention rate among participants, but is rather vague in defining the term, which seems to include anyone who visited a distribution center more than once, even if the visits were months apart.

In a British study, by the tenth visit there was an 80 percent drop-out rate. By the 20th, the rate rose to 95 percent. Of the remaining five percent, the majority weren't sharing needles to begin with.

The New Haven study boasts a 33 percent reduction, over seven months, of HIV infection among addicts in the program. The figure was arrived at by a complicated formula that compared the rate of infection in returned needles with that in syringes picked up in shooting galleries and off the streets. But is the difference due to the program or the people in it? Those taking part in needle exchanges are the least likely to share.

National commissions

addicts "know they could die in the next 30 minutes from a heart attack, stroke or overdose and yet we expect them to take precautions against a disease [AIDS] which will kill them in seven years." Moreover, "even if they were inclined to take precautions when stone-cold sober, their good resolve is unlikely to continue when they're high."

The plan could lead to a false sense of security. Needles aren't the only source of infection. Sharing water used to rinse syringes and cotton to filter heroin has essentially the same effect.

The availability of needles isn't even a factor in sharing. (Is there less in the 83 states where they're available over the counter?) Studies show sharing increases with the incidence of depression, which makes users less inclined to be cautious.

Then there's the downside. "AIDS is a fatal disease, but so is drug abuse. Any activity that makes it easier to use drugs is dangerous," Kleber comments.

Everything government does sends a message. Governmental action is Western Union on a grand scale. You can't tell me that plying 15-year-old boys with condoms in the public schools doesn't imply social sanction of adolescent sex. "That's all right, dear. We know you're going to do it anyway (although — wink nudge — we really wish you wouldn't). Just be safe."

For the past decade, we've been screaming "just say no" at the top of our lungs, shouting it from billboards, public service announcements, and drug education programs. A legion of stars and sports figures have been enlisted in the effort. We fairly plead with youth not to barbecue their brains on a chemical brazier.

rarely betray an understanding of human nature. They invariably assume that the subject population will act as desired. Teen-aged boys, who have a hard time reading bus schedules, will use condoms as instructed. Once introduced to the program, hardcore addicts, who live a life of crime on the streets (40 percent of whom will be dead within 20 years after starting on drugs), will file back to the clinic after each fix to exchange their dirty, old needles for brand-new, spanking clean syringes, which (needless to say) they wouldn't dream of lending to friend.

Dr. Herbert Kleber, deputy director of the federal drug policy office, says the proposal "flies in the face of everything we know about the psy-

Then we turn around and present addicts with the means to pump poison into their veins. (Knock, Knock, "Western Union")

The learned experts and dedicated activists ignore society's long-range obligations. In the mad rush to provide quick fix solutions to the crisis of the hour, they forget society's foremost function: to make judgments, to uphold standards, to proclaim that one course is acceptable and another not.

It stands to reason that you don't fight a contagion (drug abuse) by cultivating the bacillus. But then reason has never been officially sanctioned by a national commission.

Don Feder's column appears each Monday and Thursday.