

Canada reveals needle exchange programme in prisons

Following pressure from activists, the Canadian Government announced two federal prisons will offer a needle exchange programme before a national roll-out. Paul Webster reports from Toronto.



After activists launched a lawsuit 6 years ago calling on the Canadian Government to provide safe syringes and needles to injection drug users in federal prisons, the government conceded to their demands on May 14. Starting almost immediately, male and female inmates in two Canadian prisons will become the first inmates in Canada to have access to needle exchange programmes. Ralph Goodale, Canada's Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness said in a prepared statement that the aim is to move towards a "full national roll-out" in all federal prisons that will "strengthen ongoing efforts to address infectious diseases in federal penitentiaries and in our communities".

The percentage of HIV-positive Canadian inmates has nearly halved over the past decade, but rates of infection in prisons remain 200 times higher than among the general public, according to federal data. Hepatitis C virus infection rates are also dropping, but the disease remains 260 times more common inside prisons than outside.

Citing evidence that prison needle exchange programmes "contribute to workplace safety" for prison staff while enhancing drug treatment programmes for inmates, the government pledged in an explanatory document to ensure its new prison needle exchange programme will "take into account the inmate's confidentiality and health" to "help address needle sharing among people who inject drugs".

Sandra Ka Hon Chu is the director of Research and Advocacy for the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, a Toronto-based group that is suing the government alongside three other groups in a case arguing that forbidding needle exchanges in prisons

violates health rights entrenched in the Canadian Constitution. She told *The Lancet* that an upcoming court date might have prompted Goodale's decision. "In recent months we've sensed an openness that we didn't see before", Chu explained. "The response shifted from no interest towards an interest in evidence-based policies."

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Chu says that the litigation will continue despite Goodale's announcement, in part because she worries the government has not explained its syringe exchange programme design. If the programme requires inmates to openly disclose their drug usage, it might deter many of them from using the programme, Chu worries. "Essential programme details remain to be determined and advocates will keep the pressure on the government", she says.

Carol Strike, a University of Toronto researcher who studies the design of needle and syringe programmes (NSPs) as well as other harm reduction strategies, including safe drug consumption facilities, told *The Lancet* that Goodale's decision was a "long overdue move" that was first recommended to the government by an expert committee convened by federal prison officials 20 years ago.

"During that time, the evidence about prison-based NSPs has grown and been ignored", Strike said. She called for faster action than "the snail's pace" Goodale has promised. "They have had ample opportunity and time to learn best practices from other jurisdictions." The programme, she says, should be "anonymous and peer run".

Rick Lines, executive director of the UK-based group Harm Reduction International, and one of the experts who advised the Canadian Government to adopt prison needle exchange programmes 20 years ago, told *The Lancet* that the success of the groups suing the government is "a massive achievement" and an "opportunity for the Canadian prison service to show leadership internationally".

Lines says that he sees the Canadian Government's move as part of a broad shift in recent years towards support for harm reduction, both domestically and internationally. Internationally, Lines says, "there has been a complete sea change" in the attitudes towards harm reduction expressed by Canadian officials at the UN Convention on Narcotics Drugs. "Within the UN, Canada has recently become a very consistent and vocal supporter of harm reduction", he says. On the domestic front, Lines notes, the Canadian Government has facilitated the opening of more than 20 safe injection facilities in cities across Canada, while relaxing barriers to overdose prevention programmes and safer drug access programmes, and moving towards soon decriminalising cannabis.

In 2016, the government returned harm reduction to federal policy by declaring a new Canadian Drugs and Substances Strategy, with lead responsibility for the strategy returned to health officials from justice officials.

In a recent study of the provincial and territorial governments' harm reduction policies, Strike concluded that "despite increasing evidence of effectiveness of a harm reduction approach to problematic substance use, the quality of current policy in Canada is poor at the provincial and territorial level".

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