

# Secure Dispensing Units

## An overview for Victorian needle and syringe programs

### WHAT ARE SECURE DISPENSING UNITS?

Secure Dispensing Units (SDUs) are self-contained units that hold and supply sterile injecting equipment. Typically, SDUs dispense packs containing sterile injecting equipment and a small disposal container. Packs dispensed by SDUs in Australia have included swabs, spoons, water ampoules, condoms and educational materials.

There are several styles and models, but they are typically unremarkable metal units. They can be stand-alone or wall-mounted. In Australia, they are usually co-located with disposal facilities.

*SDUs do not advertise their contents. In this way, they help protect consumer anonymity and reduce unwanted attention from the non-injecting general public.*

### WHY ARE SDUs USED?

SDUs help to increase access to sterile injecting equipment.

Sharing injecting equipment is the primary mode of transmission for blood borne viruses such as HIV and hepatitis C. Although the proportion of people who inject drugs who report this practice has declined since 1999, the behavior persists.<sup>1</sup> Chief among the factors contributing to equipment sharing is that sterile injecting equipment is not always available at the times people require it due to geographic distance

and/or the operating hours of existing Needle and Syringe Programs (NSPs).<sup>ii, iii, iv</sup>

SDUs have been particularly beneficial in locations where:

- it is not possible to establish a staffed NSP;
- some people are uncomfortable or unwilling to access staffed NSPs;
- there are gaps in the availability and accessibility of NSPs (e.g. after business hours and weekends) compared with consumption patterns of local people who inject drugs; and/or
- clients have limited access to transport (both public and private) and thus cannot always access NSP outlets.

*There are no legislative or policy impediments to the use of SDUs by Victorian NSPs operating in accordance with the state guidelines.*

SDUs have significant public health benefits and are an augmentation of existing programs aimed at prevention and reduction of drug-related harms such as NSPs, primary health services, drug treatment programs including opioid substitution treatment, crisis and supported accommodation, community mental health programs and prison release programs.

## WHERE ARE SDUs USED?

SDUs operate in the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia.

There are over 100 SDUs in New South Wales alone; they have operated smoothly and without undue attention since 1993. SDUs were introduced in other Australian jurisdictions since 2005. Evaluations of these trials<sup>v,vi,vii</sup> consistently report:

- Limited to nil adverse media coverage;
- Increased overall and after-hours access to sterile injecting equipment; and
- No reductions in access to staffed NSP outlets.

## WHAT ARE THE KEY ISSUES TO CONSIDER IN INTRODUCING SDUs?

The key to any project, including the installation and operation of SDUs, is a well thought-out initial plan. Important issues to consider are:

- Establishing the need for SDUs in your local area.
- Identifying where the SDU or SDUs should be located to maximise access for the greatest number of clients.
- Deciding on the types of equipment to be provided through SDUs; hours of operation; type of machine used.
- Identifying who is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the SDU and for troubleshooting problems.
- Calculating the costs for installing and operating the SDUs.
- Assessing the potential impact of SDUs in the local area and planning strategies to minimise adverse impacts.
- Developing stakeholder support and managing concerns.
- Identifying and managing risks.

- Deciding on a monitoring and evaluation plan.

## WHAT ARE THE COSTS ASSOCIATED WITH THE OPERATION OF SDUs?

It is difficult to quantify the actual costs for the operation of SDUs as there are many variables. These include the types of machines used, equipment supplied, and contractual arrangements for support and repairs.

Some of these costs may be mitigated. For example, the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services provides some injecting equipment *free of charge* to registered NSP outlets. It can also assist with waste collection for used injecting equipment.

Thinking through some of the pertinent issues will help to clarify the human and financial resources required to extend the reach of your service.

***Our SDU Guide provides more information and may be downloaded at [www.penington.org.au](http://www.penington.org.au).***

<sup>i</sup> See Iversen, J. and Maher, L. (2015). *Australian NSP Survey. Prevalence of HIV, HCV and injecting and sexual behaviour among Needle and Syringe Program attendees. 20 Year National Data Report 1995 – 2014*. Kirby Institute, UNSW, Sydney, NSW.

<sup>ii</sup> Dwyer, R., Fry, C., Carruthers, S., Bolleter, A., Dolan, K., Donald, A., Byrne, J., & Loxley, W. (2002). *ABRIDUS: the Australian blood-borne virus risk and injecting drug use study*. Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre Inc, Fitzroy, VIC.

<sup>iii</sup> Southgate, E., Day, C., Kimber, J., Weatherall, A., MacDonald, M., Woolcock, G.W.E., McGuckin, S., & Dolan, K. (2003). *Dealing with risk: a multidisciplinary study of injecting drug use, hepatitis C and other blood borne viruses in Australia*. National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW, Sydney, NSW.

<sup>iv</sup> Anex (2008). *The graveyard shift: access to sterile injecting equipment in metropolitan Melbourne*. Anex Inc, Melbourne, VIC.

<sup>v</sup> McDonald D (2007). *ACT syringe vending machines trial 2005-2006*. Siggins Miller & David Miller, Social Research & Evaluation. Canberra, ACT.

<sup>vi</sup> Queensland Government (2006). *Evaluation Report: After-hours needle and syringe dispensing machine pilot project*. Queensland Government, Queensland Health, Brisbane, QLD.

<sup>vii</sup> Drug and Alcohol Council of South Australia (2011). *Syringe vending machine trial 30 November 2009 – 30 November 2010: evaluation report*. Drug and Alcohol Council of South Australia, Adelaide, SA.