



Syringe-dispensing machines being trialled in the ACT are a newer motorised model.

The syringe-dispensing machine at the Kerketon Road Centre is one of the oldest machines in Australia. It was piloted during 1992.

SYRINGE - DISPENSING MACHINES

Despite close to two decades of service provision, and high numbers of hepatitis C infection among people who inject drugs, access to injecting equipment after business hours, and on weekends and public holidays, remains an issue for the Australian NSP sector.

Drug use is not confined to a nine-to-five schedule. Practitioner feedback from the only NSP outlet in Australia that is staffed 24 hours a day and 365 days a year indicates that close to half of the services are provided between 6 pm and 6 am. Research commissioned by the NSW Health Department identified that 9 pm to 6 am was a key period for access to injecting equipment.

Yet in many parts of Australia there are few if any access points to sterile injecting equipment during these hours.

Syringe-dispensing machines present a simple solution. Commonly referred to as "vending machines", they have been operating in New South Wales since 1992. There are now approximately 102 units throughout the state. The majority of them are located in regional and rural areas. They were introduced when the HIV epidemic was an important concern for the community. The policy imperative at the time was to "get as many needles out there" so that people were using sterile prevention materials for every injecting episode. As a result, the machines are accessible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Syringe-dispensing machines address a number of issues relating to accessibility of sterile injecting equipment. They may be established in areas where, for a variety of reasons, it is not possible to establish staffed outlets; they ensure the availability of preventative materials after business hours and on weekends when it would not be cost effective to operate staffed outlets; and they provide access to a basic prevention strategy to current injectors who for a range of reasons might not otherwise access staffed programs.

The use of syringe-dispensing machines as a means to extend the reach of prevention programs is supported by international evidence. Machines have also been trialled and evaluated in France and Germany.

The evaluation of the French trial compared different modes of equipment provision, and concluded that the machines increased accessibility for people who do not identify themselves as injectors, those who inject sporadically, and younger injectors who are usually reluctant to access

staffed NSP outlets and who are at greater risk of acquiring a blood-borne infection compared to other groups of injectors. These findings are corroborated by the German and Australian experience.

An evaluation of the dispensing-machine provision in rural New South Wales conducted during 1995 found that the machine was used by a broader range of injectors compared to those who used the staffed service at the community health centre, and that there was an associated increase in inquiries about hepatitis C issues due to information provided at the machine.

The majority of machines in New South Wales are located at fixed-site NSP outlets with specific funding for specialist staff whose primary responsibility is NSP service provision (commonly referred to as "primary" outlets). Practitioner feedback indicates that in some cases, people who utilise the machines may not have been aware that the staffed NSP existed. Over a period of time, however, as they become more familiar with the site, some people do begin to access the staffed service.

As indicated in the NSW NSP Policy and Procedures Manual, dispensing machines operate as a complement to staffed outlets. Different modes of needle and syringe provision involve different advantages and disadvantages, and tend to attract different types of clients. Effective coverage and outcomes can only be maximised through the adoption of a variety of models that reflect the needs of various target groups.

Given the sensitive nature of injecting drug use, the need for confidentiality and personal privacy is especially important to ensure that access to services is not obstructed. Presenting at a staffed service may prompt a perception of risk, particularly if clients have had prior experience with

unsympathetic staff or perceive that staff are judgemental. This is particularly the case in rural settings. Dispensing machines offer a unique advantage in facilitating complete anonymity.

Used injecting equipment inappropriately discarded in public places represents an important issue for the continued viability and community acceptance of needle and syringe distribution schemes, including needle- and syringe-dispensing machines.

Evaluations of the introduction of needle- and syringe-dispensing machines in New South Wales and in Kalgoorlie, Western Australia (where a unit was established on the site of the Kalgoorlie Regional Hospital during 2000), indicate that they do not increase the numbers of used needles and syringes inappropriately discarded in public places. Rather, there are some indications that where appropriate disposal facilities are located within the vicinity of the machines, these are frequently used, thus reducing syringe litter in the immediate vicinity.

The choice of an appropriate site for the location of a dispensing machine is important in facilitating the use of the service. The machines ought to be located where injecting drug use is known to occur and be positioned where they can be used without fear of police surveillance, public scrutiny, verbal and physical assault or harassment from other drug users. The machines ought to be located inconspicuously so that drug users are not easily identified.

This has the added advantage of minimising the likelihood of other members of the community, especially children, accessing the machines. Where the machine is designed in such a way that the equipment dispensed is not visible from the outside, a higher degree of discretion may be assured.

The introduction of syringe-dispensing machines will not encourage people to start injecting. Various studies in relation to initiation into injecting have found that there are multiple factors associated with the uptake of injecting and that the availability of needles and syringes alone does not precipitate injecting.

Another common concern is that syringe-dispensing machines located outside agencies providing NSP services may encourage injecting on the agency's premises. The evaluation of the introduction of syringe-dispensing machine in Kalgoorlie found that syringe litter on the grounds did not increase after the introduction of the machine. It may be inferred from this that the introduction of the machine did not substantially increase injecting drug use on the premises.

Following an inquiry into syringe access by the Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Health during 2003, the Australian Capital Territory is currently implementing a trial of "syringe vending machines". Queensland Health has also announced its intention to introduce dispensing machines.

continued page 4

4 DISPENSING MACHINES: ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

Syringe-dispensing machines have the advantage of extending the reach of sterile injecting-equipment distribution schemes – both in terms of reaching particular groups of injectors and access to preventative equipment after business hours and on weekends. But they have their limitations. This article explores the more common concerns.

6 SUPPLY, DEMAND AND HARM REDUCTION STRATEGIES IN AUSTRALIAN PRISONS

This article provides a summary of the Australian National Council on Drugs study documenting the nature and breadth of supply, demand and harm reduction strategies that have been developed by prison authorities around Australia.

8 PREGNANCY AND DRUG USE

As the frontline health service for injecting drug users, NSPs can provide a caring and non-judgemental environment in which to support women drug users through pregnancy, childbirth and parenting, and refer them to appropriate services. This article explores some issues and concerns for young women considering childbirth and pregnancy who may also be using drugs.