

Needle exchange program lauded as preventive, cost-effective

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Hawaii's needle exchange and outreach programs are preventing new HIV infections and saving millions of dollars, says a national researcher.

Nearly all new HIV infections across the country are among drug injectors, said Dr. Don Des Jarlais of the Beth Israel Medical Center in New York.

But in Hawaii, he said, "New HIV infections among drug injectors are a rare event."

Hawaii was the first state to start a syringe exchange program in 1990. The law requires annual evaluations, which Des Jarlais has done for several years.

"It's very nice to do a report that is really good news about HIV prevention," he said. "Hawaii clearly got its act together early and most effectively."

Peter Whitticar, chief of the Sexually Transmitted Disease/AIDS Prevention Branch of the state Health Department, said he feels particularly good about the report because Des Jarlais is "one of the leading people in the world on this kind of issue. He doesn't pull any punches."

In other areas, Des Jarlais said, 30 percent to 40 percent of drug injectors tend to be infected with HIV. Here, the HIV infection rate among drug injectors is about 1 percent, he said.

He attributes this to the syringe

exchange program, community outreach workers and the ability to put people who inject drugs into treatment.

It's cost-effective, amounting to millions in savings, if it prevents as few as five new HIV infections per year among drug injectors, Des Jarlais said. Treating a single HIV infection has been estimated at about \$102,000, and new therapies cost more, he said.

The number of syringes exchanged fell from a peak of 173,671 in 1995 to 133,958 in 1996 because of a loss of clients to death, prison and staff turnover at neighbor island sites, Des Jarlais noted. Last year, 143,715 syringes were exchanged.

Whitticar said he will try to

integrate with other programs to carry out Des Jarlais' recommendations. Other recommendations include:

■ Putting more emphasis on hepatitis B and C infection among drug injectors. Those diseases are much easier to spread than HIV, Des Jarlais said.

■ Increasing emphasis on sexually transmitted diseases other than HIV. Officials have reported a steady increase in the number of gonorrhea cases among men having sex with men.

■ Looking at men who have sex with men and also inject drugs. There is limited data on that group, and special services may need to be developed, Des Jarlais said.