NJ State Assembly Passes Non-Prescription Needles Bill

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The New Jersey legislature has passed a bill allowing over-the-counter sales of hypodermic needles, NJ.com reports. Clean needles help reduce transmission of blood-borne diseases like HIV and hepatitis C, for which sharing used needles is a major vector.

The bill allows an adult to purchase up to 10 needles from a pharmacist. If signed into law, New Jersey will be the 49th state to allow syringe purchases without a prescription, with Delaware the last holdout.

The bill now goes to Governor Chris Christie who has not publicly stated whether or not he will sign it. Christie opposed needle exchange programs while a U.S. attorney, but after visiting a tent city for the homeless during his 2009 gubernatorial campaign, he indicated that he might be open to changing his mind on the subject.

Opponents of the bill acknowledge that the sale of clean needles reduces the spread of disease, but they argue that the bill doesn't include a mechanism for safely disposing of needles, that it doesn't require purchasers to show ID demonstrating that they're older than 18 and that it sends a message that drug use is acceptable. Sponsors of the bill counter that the bill requires pharmacists to give purchasers information about needle disposal and drug treatment programs, and that the bill also gives diabetics better access to syringes.

Under the new bill, it would be a crime to buy a needle and give it to someone else, with a maximum sentence of six months in prison and a $1,000 fine.

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