HIV, Hepatitis C Advocates Slam Reporting Around U.K.'s "Spit Hood" Debate

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The Hepatitis C Trust and National AIDS Trust (NAT) recently put out a statement confronting inaccurate reporting over the proposed use of "spit hoods" by U.K. law enforcement to supposedly help prevent the risk of hepatitis C virus (HCV) and HIV infection among police officers.

Both organizations wish to make clear that neither virus can be transmitted via spitting and that suggestions to the contrary reinforce stigma and misperceptions that surround both viruses.

A spit hood is a mesh fabric restraint device that goes over the head and face of a person under arrest and aims to prevent him or her from spitting at or biting someone. The devices have been criticized numerous times by groups like Amnesty International for breaching human rights guidelines. Critics have called spit hoods primitive, cruel and degrading. They can cause distress and panic in the detained person and make it difficult for an officer to notice any difficulty breathing.

Spit hoods can also be life-threatening when someone wearing one is pushed to the ground, which can cause the fabric to cling to the face and cause accidental asphyxiation. Because of this, many British police forces have outlawed their use.

However, there are still many proponents of the devices across the United Kingdom. Many of them, including the U.K.'s Center for Public Safety, base much of their argument on the false assumption that spit and bloody saliva can spread HIV and hepatitis C.

"It is quite clear that hepatitis C cannot be transmitted via spitting, and we cannot accept a situation where this is portrayed as a genuine threat," said Charles Gore, chief executive of The Hepatitis C Trust, a patient-led and patient-run U.K. charity that's been advocating on behalf of the HCV-positive community since 2001.

Deborah Gold, chief executive of NAT similarly stated: "HIV is irrelevant to the debate about spit hoods because spitting simply is not an HIV transmission route. Using fear of HIV to justify spit hoods is extremely stigmatizing and of great concern to NAT."

The groups’ joint press release also argues that spreading such falsehoods about HIV and hepatitis C transmission also cause unnecessary alarm to police staff, unduly burdening them with stress and unneeded precaution while on the job.

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