Emerging Epidemic of Hepatitis C Among Young Minnesotans

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Communities across Minnesota are struggling with both rising rates of heroin abuse and new cases of the hepatitis C virus (HCV), the Duluth News Tribune reports. Minnesota health officials suspect dirty needles are to blame for what the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is now calling an “emerging epidemic” of HCV among young people in the state.

In 2012, 32 Minnesotans were newly diagnosed with hepatitis C. State health data also shows that new hep C cases among people younger than 30 have jumped from 5 percent to nearly 14 percent since 2001.

Although a wide range of studies show that needle exchange programs for heroin addicts can reduce the transmission of blood-borne diseases and don’t encourage drug use, Minnesota health officials report that only three stand-alone needle exchange programs exist in the state. Advocates are now pushing for more funding and greater access to these sites in order to help curb Minnesota’s rising HCV and addiction rates.

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