Hepatitis C and Heroin on the Rise in Minnesota (and most of the U.S.)

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HCV Plush from Giant Microbes

Health officials in Minnesota are seeing an increase of people being diagnosed with hepatitis C virus (HCV), and suspect that it is related to the rising rate of heroin use. HCV is known to be transmitted via blood, and injection-drug use is known to spread HCV.

32 Minnesotans were diagnosed with HCV in 2012, but the actual number of people infected is certainly higher. Many people do not develop symptoms immediately, and in some cases infections can smolder for years.

In May 2013, the Minnesota Health Department estimated 39,000 people were living with HCV statewide. Needle exchange programs are one way to combat the spread of blood-borne pathogens like Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), or Hepatitis B and C viruses. Needle exchanges have been successfully used in other countries, however in the United States they often come under scrutiny due to misunderstanding and stigma.

I found a list of five needle exchanges in the state of Minnesota. That doesn't seem like enough.

The heroin problem in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area has been worsening. 54 people died of heroin overdose in 2013 in Hennepin county, the deadliest year on record.

I encourage everyone to use the comments section below!

- Lance D. Presser has a PhD in microbiology and immunology and is a public health laboratorian.
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