

Letters

Harm minimisation in Australian prisons — health protection still depends on where you serve your time

TO THE EDITOR: In June 2007 we highlighted the inconsistent application of community-accepted harm minimisation strategies, when offered to prisoners, among the various Australian jurisdictions.¹

We sought information from the eight prisoner health services to assess how harm minimisation strategies were being implemented in each jurisdiction (Box).

Progress has been slow, particularly in Queensland and the Northern Territory. The positive progress, however, has been the trial of condom distribution in four Victorian prisons (not yet expanded, at the time of writing), the pharmacotherapy program in Victoria, and the introduction of buprenorphine in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, the Australian Capital Territory and Tasmania.

Regulated exchange of injecting equipment has not yet been achieved. There have been sustained (but unconfirmed) reports of “self-regulated” tattoo parlours in at least one NSW prison (personal communication with patients, 2010–

2012). The ACT Government is actively engaging the community in a comprehensive strategy to manage bloodborne viruses at the Alexander Maconochie Centre.² This would be the first substantive response by any jurisdiction to a 2008 national commitment of health and custodial authorities.³

Australia will adopt the United Nations *Optional protocol to the convention against torture*. This will bring international scrutiny to the nation’s commitment to the equivalence of services offered to Australian prisoners.⁴ On the health component of that commitment, we will be judged harshly.

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Competing interests: No relevant disclosures.

doi: 10.5694/mja12.10228

¹ Levy MH, Treloar C, McDonald R, Booker N. Prisons, hepatitis C and harm minimisation. *Med J Aust* 2007; 186: 647–649.

² Push for free tattoos at ACT jail. *Canberra Times* 2011; 26 Nov. <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/news/local/news/general/push-for-free-tattoos-at-act-jail/2371566.aspx> (accessed Jan 2012).

³ Ministerial Advisory Committee on AIDS, Sexual Health and Hepatitis; Hepatitis C Subcommittee. Hepatitis C prevention, treatment and care: guidelines for Australian

custodial settings. Evidence base for the guidelines. Canberra: Department of Health and Ageing, 2008. [http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/9F632131D38B580CCA257505007C1A70/\\$File/prison-guidelines-evidence.pdf](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/9F632131D38B580CCA257505007C1A70/$File/prison-guidelines-evidence.pdf) (accessed Jan 2012).

⁴ Australian Human Rights Commission. Commission welcomes steps towards better monitoring of places of detention. http://www.hreoc.gov.au/about/media/news/2012/18_12.html (accessed Aug 2012). □

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Levy et al

Application of some harm-minimisation strategies in Australian prisons in 2012, by state and territory

Jurisdiction	Bleach	Condoms	Pharmacotherapies	Tattooing	Exchange of injecting equipment
ACT	Available	Available	Methadone; buprenorphine (withdrawal only)	Unregulated	Unregulated
NSW	Available	Available	Methadone, buprenorphine	Unregulated (unconfirmed reports from one prison of a regulated parlour)	Unregulated
NT	Not available	Not available	Methadone	Unregulated	Unregulated
Qld	Not available	Not available	Methadone (women only)	Unregulated	Unregulated
SA	Not available	Available	Methadone, buprenorphine	Unregulated	Unregulated
Tas	Not available	Available	Methadone, buprenorphine	Unregulated	Unregulated
Vic	Available	Available at four prisons, and for sanctioned conjugal visits at other prisons.	Methadone, buprenorphine	Unregulated	Unregulated
WA	Not available	Available	Methadone; buprenorphine (maintenance only)	Unregulated	Unregulated

ACT = Australian Capital Territory. NSW = New South Wales. NT = Northern Territory. Qld = Queensland. SA = South Australia. Tas = Tasmania. Vic = Victoria. WA = Western Australia. ♦