Out in the Cold

Drug users denied needles in needless Alaska study

March 1, 1997 By Walter Armstrong and Ronnilyn Pustil

Advocates are scrambling to shut down a needle-exchange study in Anchorage, Alaska. Why? It's Tuskegee II, they charge. The project, led by University of Alaska's Dr. Dennis Fisher, would assign some 600 users to either a "treatment" group-those who could trade dirty needles for clean ones-or a "control" group-those who could not. People in the control group would be turned away frm exchanges and given a list of local pharmacies that sell syringes. Researchers would test each group to determine the incidence of HIV and hepatitis B.

In a letter to Dr. Harold Varmus, director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), which funded the $2.4 million project, Dr. Peter Lurie, a leading needle-exchange researcher at the University of California, and Sidney M. Wolfe, executive director of Public Citizen's Health Research Group, demanded the study be aborted: "It's unconscionable for the NIH to fund a project that violates basic research ethics in a manner the researchers themselves admit 'represents the withholding of a potentially life-saving service.'" The study deprives participants of two effective means of disease prevention-no-cost clean needles and hep B vaccine. Varmus reviewed the study, and-as *POZ* went to press-gave it the green light, with this major concession to activists: Researchers must provide everyone in the study with hep B vaccine.

In a bit of guerilla research by Lurie and Wolfe, three volunteers found that a mere 14 percent of Anchorage pharmacies sold sterile syringes without harassing the customer.

Fisher attacked Lurie's activist tactics: "Lurie immediately politicized his criticism by going to the press. He tried to set up another exchange in Anchorage and shipped needles here to destroy my study. That's not what somebody with a genuine concern for public health does."

But Lurie asks, "Who has a greater concern for public health-someone who opens a needle exchange for all drug-users, or someone who excludes drug-users to get a big grant?"

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