

Evaluation of a Preliminary Harm Reduction Project in Taiwan

Abstract:

The sterile syringe-needle exchange program and the substitution treatment program have been established in a number of countries and have proven effective in reducing the transmission of HIV. In Taiwan, intravenous drug use has become the major mode of HIV transmission. National surveillance data in 2005 reveal that more than 70% of new infections are among IDUs. Accordingly, the preliminary harm reduction programs were initiated in four cities since 2005. The central premise of this study is to evaluate the feasibility and the effectiveness of the comprehensive harm reduction services in Taiwan.

A mixed method research design was used to collect quantitative and qualitative data. In qualitative aspect, focus groups, in-depth interviews, and unstructured observations were conducted to understand the viewpoints of 131 key informants, including harm reduction service providers, IDUs, community pharmacists, health workers, community neighborhoods, and local health executive officials. In quantitative aspect, a structured questionnaire was used to investigate the accessibility and the level of satisfaction of the harm reduction program on 46 IDUs who participate in the syringe-needle exchange program.

The study findings reveal a range of perspectives about the preliminary harm reduction programs. The majority of IDUs highlights the behaviors changes with the introduction of the syringe-needle-exchange services, and also documents the barriers of access to the service. On the other hand, the responses from IDUs registered in the substitution treatment program are encouraging as the drug replacement therapy serves a bridge for IDUs to return to a normal life in terms of their health, finance, occupation, family and social relationship. From the perspective of service providers, the harm reduction programs are regarded as the appropriated strategies to reduce the transmission of HIV and social costs, but some problems and barriers are noted as well, such as low returning rate of used needles, law enforcement, low counseling and referring rate. The success and infrastructure of the harm reduction programs is dependent upon collaboration from various government agencies and non-government agencies, in addition to the local communities.

Keyword: intravenous drug use · harm reduction · syringe-needle exchange program · the substitution treatment program · Taiwan