

VPP A.I.D.S. - RP OCT 20 1993 P4

Monterey supervisors support needle exchange

By CALVIN DEMMON
CENTRAL COAST BUREAU

Drug addicts should be allowed to swap dirty needles for clean ones, the Monterey County Board of Supervisors said yesterday.

The board also hinted that if the county's rate of AIDS infection worsens, the county could declare a state of emergency, in which case needle exchanges could be carried out even though they are against state law.

By a 4-1 vote, the board agreed to encourage legalization of needle exchanges as a way to combat the spread of AIDS infection among injection-drug users.

Needle exchanges offer drug users one sterile syringe for every syringe turned in. Participants are also urged to seek treatment.

Such programs help keep addicts who are infected with the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) that causes AIDS from pass-

ing it along, according to the Monterey County Health Department and other agencies.

Opponents say needle exchanges send the wrong message about drug abuse and could increase drug addiction. Gov. Pete Wilson recently vetoed a bill that would have established a test program in the state.

Supervisor Edith Johnsen cast the sole vote against endorsing needle exchanges, arguing that they are not the panacea that their supporters claim them to be.

When the supervisors last considered the issue, in May 1992, they voted 4-1 to support then-pending legislation that would have legalized needle exchanges. In that case the "no" vote was cast by Judy Pennycook, who has since left the board.

Dr. Robert Melton, Monterey County health director, told supervisors that San Francisco officials

have declared an AIDS emergency and that based on that, needle exchanges are being carried out.

To a question from Supervisor Barbara Shipnuck, Melton said that if an emergency declaration were to be made in Monterey County it would be up to him.

Outside the meeting, Melton said he has no plans to make such a declaration.

The board unanimously approved a motion by Sam Karas directing Melton to discuss that and other possibilities with the county sheriff, the district attorney and the county counsel.

Sheriff Norman Hicks, who last week repeated his own opposition to needle exchanges, did not address the supervisors yesterday.

However, two recovering drug addicts told the board that they would have made use of needle-exchange programs if they had been available, and said such pro-

grams would not increase the incidence of drug abuse.

Monterey County's rate of HIV cases related to injected-drug abuse is more than three times the state's average, said Joy Rubey, executive director of the Monterey County AIDS Project.

A new report by the national Centers for Disease Control found no evidence that needle exchanges increase drug abuse, Rubey said, while a study in New Haven, Conn., estimated that needle exchanges resulted in a 33 percent reduction in new HIV infections.

"Syringe exchange programs do not cause harm and they can reduce the spread of HIV," Rubey said. "We would not be adding more needles into the community."

Rubey said 381 AIDS cases have been reported in Monterey County since 1981, 24 percent of them related to injection-drug abuse.