

SJM 4/10/92 B-1 A.I.D.S.

Needle swap: front lines of AIDS war

BY LEE QUARNSTROM
Mercury News Staff Writer

"I've been a dope fiend for 25 years," admits the man on the mountain bike. "Heroin is my drug of choice. I'm using about 50 to 100 bucks a day right now."

"And all I can say about these people is that I couldn't say enough good things about them and this program."

"These people" are the Santa Cruz volunteers who swap clean needles for dirty ones in an effort to curb the spread of AIDS among intravenous drug users.

Right now, Rick, a 45-year-old junkie who pays for his "jones" by working as a carpenter and a mechanic, has a new "rig" — a hypodermic and syringe — that the volunteers have swapped for his old outfit.

The exchange takes place late one night near downtown Santa Cruz, where a few addicts mingle easily and inconspicuously with non-users. Volunteers from the needle-exchange program show up once a week.

"These people are like pioneers," says Rick.

Earlier, about a dozen volunteers, most of them young women, gather downtown before splitting into teams of three volunteers. Each team includes two veterans of the needle-swapping effort and one neophyte.

One team leaves to make "house calls." "House calls are the ultimate exercise in

trust," says Richard Smith, who heads the needle-swapping program. "The addicts give us their addresses and we visit once a week to exchange rigs."

The combination hypodermic and syringe costs 8 cents apiece. Mostly purchased through a Bay Area needle-exchange program, money comes primarily from donations, including contributions by addicts themselves.

Another team heads for the bleak streets of Beach Flats — where, said Smith, most of their clientele is white. "Latino drug users just don't want to do anything they think will incriminate themselves. If we could just get one connection in the Latino community . . ."

Our team heads for the meeting place at the edge of downtown. Smith, 46, who has been exchanging new needles for old with Santa Cruz junkies for two years, is a volunteer. He also works part time for the Santa Cruz AIDS Project — which keeps an arm's-length distance from the program. Also in the team are Heather Edney, a 21-year-old Cabrillo College student who says she used to freebase cocaine and who has been exchanging needles since last fall, and Emily, a Santa Cruz teen-ager who's on her first night out with the program.

Smith and Edney climb out of the car first, asking us to wait for a minute or two

See **NEEDLES**, Page 5B

Needle swap is part of war on AIDS

■ NEEDLES

from Page 1B

to avoid spooking their clients. They walk into a darkened parking lot nearby and are immediately surrounded by a silent crowd of addicts. Rigs change hands quickly, and within a couple of minutes more than a dozen clients have walked, pedaled or driven away.

These are not down-and-out street junkies. Oh, there are a few who shuffle away in hand-me-down clothes, but most, like Rick, seem clean and tidy. Some are in nice, late-model cars.

"We even have some housewives who tell us their husbands don't know they're users," says Smith.

He says clients are split between heroin addicts and people who prefer to inject cocaine. "But," says Smith, "the truth is, most of them use a variety of drugs."

Along with the rigs, Smith and Edney hand out condoms, alcohol wipes and bleach to sterilize needles. The wipes, Smith says, are used by addicts to clean bacteria off the skin before injecting drugs.

Emily, who says her parents were proud earlier in the day when she revealed she was going out with needle-exchange volunteers, is thrilled to be part of the effort.

"It's important not to support the addict," she says with wisdom beyond her years. "But it's also important to let them know you're there to help keep them from getting AIDS."

"It's a very powerful feeling."

□

Isn't this whole thing illegal? Of course it is.

But so far, the volunteers haven't had any run-ins with the local cops. Police in Santa Cruz have bigger fish to fry than busting people trying to stop the spread of acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

"In the grand scheme of things," police Sgt. Joe Haebe

said, "this is at the lower end of the priority scale."

Two bills pending in Sacramento would legalize needle-exchange pilot programs in California. Santa Cruz County supervisors, who heard Smith talk about the local program, have endorsed the legis-

lation.

Until or unless those bills pass, Smith and Edney and Emily will continue operating outside the law. They believe the law is inadequate, given the threat of AIDS. And they believe deeply in what they are doing.