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Press Release

HIV/AIDS IN PRISONS: PRIORITY NEED FOR PREVENTIVE MEASURES

1 December 1995 - An increasing number of specialists, activists and prison staff are insisting that inmates have access to condoms, bleach and sterile needles to protect themselves against the spread of HIV.

"The spread of HIV in prisons is cause of increasing concern. The measures necessary to prevent the spread of HIV and other infections are not being implemented quickly enough, although the rate of HIV infection is already ten times greater than in the rest of the population," states Dr Ralf Jürgens, the author of HIV/AIDS in Prisons, a discussion paper jointly published by the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network and the Canadian AIDS Society (CAS) on the occasion of World AIDS Day.

Dr Jürgens, who was also the Project Coordinator of the Expert Committee on AIDS and Prisons (ECAP), insists upon the urgent need to implement preventive measures that have long been advocated by specialists in many fields: "By respecting the rights of inmates to protect themselves against the spread of HIV we protect society as a whole."

Extensive research and consultation across the country and the world has been undertaken. The discussion paper gives a disquieting picture of the situation in prisons, pointing out: (1) a 40 percent increase in the number of known cases of HIV/AIDS in federal correctional institutions over a period of 16 months; (2) an increase in the number of prisoners living with HIV infection or AIDS, requiring more extensive and costly medical care; (3) the rapid spread of hepatitis C in prisons, with rates now ranging between 28 and 40 percent; (4) increasing evidence of high-risk behaviours in prisons and increasing evidence that, as a result of such behaviours, HIV is being transmitted in prisons; and (5)

encouraging examples of preventive measures used successfully abroad, but not in Canada, such as the distribution of sterile needles in Swiss prisons. The paper concludes: "Governments and prison administrations have a moral, perhaps even a legal, obligation to provide prisoners with condoms, bleach and sterile needles to protect themselves against the spread of HIV."

Among the 11 recommendations for action concerning the confidentiality of medical information, education, preventive measures, health care, compassionate release, and drug policy, Jürgens says that "the introduction of needles exchange programs in Canadian prisons is even more pressing today than at the time of the release of ECAP's Final Report." He adds: "Prisoners, even though they live behind the walls of a prison, are still part of our communities and deserve the same level of care and protection that people outside prison get: they are sentenced to prison, not to be infected." According to Russell Armstrong, CAS's new Executive Director, "these important suggestions will help the Correctional Service of Canada and provincial systems to increase and accelerate their efforts to prevent transmission among inmates, to the staff and, finally, to the public." The various authorities will be asked to respond.

This phase of the joint CAS/Network Project on Legal and Ethical Issues Raised by HIV/AIDS has been co-funded by the AIDS Care, Treatment and Support Unit of Health Canada and the Correctional Service of Canada under the National AIDS Strategy, Phase II.



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