

TB on rise among AIDS victims, Dr. Nosal says

By SAL BOMMARITO

Special to the Independent/Free Press

Cases of tuberculosis will increase unless Halton Region takes a more active role in preventing the spread of AIDS, the region's chief medical officer of health has warned.

"TB is exploding right now," Dr. Bob Nosal told the region's health and social services committee. "One of the major reasons for the increase in TB is through HIV (the virus that causes AIDS). One of the major concerns with people who get HIV is, will they get TB?"

Statistically speaking, "one of us will probably get (TB)," Dr. Nosal told the committee.

Although there have been only "nine or ten" reported cases of TB annually in Halton, "in Peel, there's around 100 a year," Dr. Nosal said.

The number of reported cases of TB in Halton has almost tripled since 1990, according to Dr. Nosal's annual report dealing with the region's communicable disease control programs.

An effective way to prevent the spread of HIV, and in turn, the spread of TB, is through a needle exchange program. It involves selling sterile needles and syringes, and needle bleach kits, through

local pharmacists to intravenous drug users, Dr. Nosal said.

Dr. Nosal said the HIV virus can be spread either through sexual transmission - both homosexual and heterosexual - or through the sharing of needles by intravenous drug users.

He said about 13 per cent of individuals who contract HIV are intravenous drug users.

Dr. Nosal said several communities have successfully implemented the needle exchange programs, including Guelph, Niagara Region, Hamilton, Toronto, and Peterborough. Currently in Halton, pharmacists only sell sterile needles and syringes to individuals who have demonstrated a medical need, such as diabetics.

Halton's needle exchange program would also focus on educating intravenous drug users about the proper way to use bleach kits - which are basically plastic bags containing a small bottle of bleach and a bottle of sterile water used to sterilize needles and syringes.

"The use of bleach as an effective disinfecting agent against HIV has been called into question," he said. However, the bleach solution is effective when used properly, stressed Dr. Nosal.

The campaign would also attempt to allay "unfounded" public concerns that needle exchange programs promote drug use, he said.

The possibility that the distribution of needles could further drug abuse is of concern to committee chairman Ralph Scholtens, a Burlington regional councillor.

"I appreciate that AIDS is a problem," Scholtens said. "But by the same token I have difficulty in giving tax dollars in aiding a program which helps people to inject

themselves with illegal substances."

"My initial concern is that I don't want to be involved in dispensing drugs. If we're in the business of handing out tools for the dispensing of drugs, that's as immoral as dispensing the drugs themselves."

Oakville Mayor Ann Mulvale called Scholtens' comments "somewhat extreme."

She said the community also has a responsibility to protect "the unsuspecting partner" of an intravenous drug user who may contract

HIV. Mulvale said there's no distinction between HIV sufferers who have contracted the virus "either from sex or drug abuse."

Mulvale conceded, however, the public's perception will be that the region's adoption of the needle exchange program "will seemingly support drug users."

The committee directed Dr. Nosal to approach local pharmacists about the feasibility of implementing the needle exchange program and to report back.

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