

PHARMACIES and blood-borne virus prevention

Needle and Syringe Programs (NSPs) have been one of the great public health and community triumphs in Australian history. 'The fact is NSPs save lives. It is a simple fact, supported by scientific evidence that drug users in Australia are one of the few injecting drug using communities in the world who have avoided a major HIV epidemic and have managed to sustain this over a 20 year period. This is no small achievement,' according to Annie Madden, Executive Officer of the Australian Injecting & Illicit Drug Users League (AIVL), at the 20th anniversary of NSP celebrations in Sydney, November 2006.

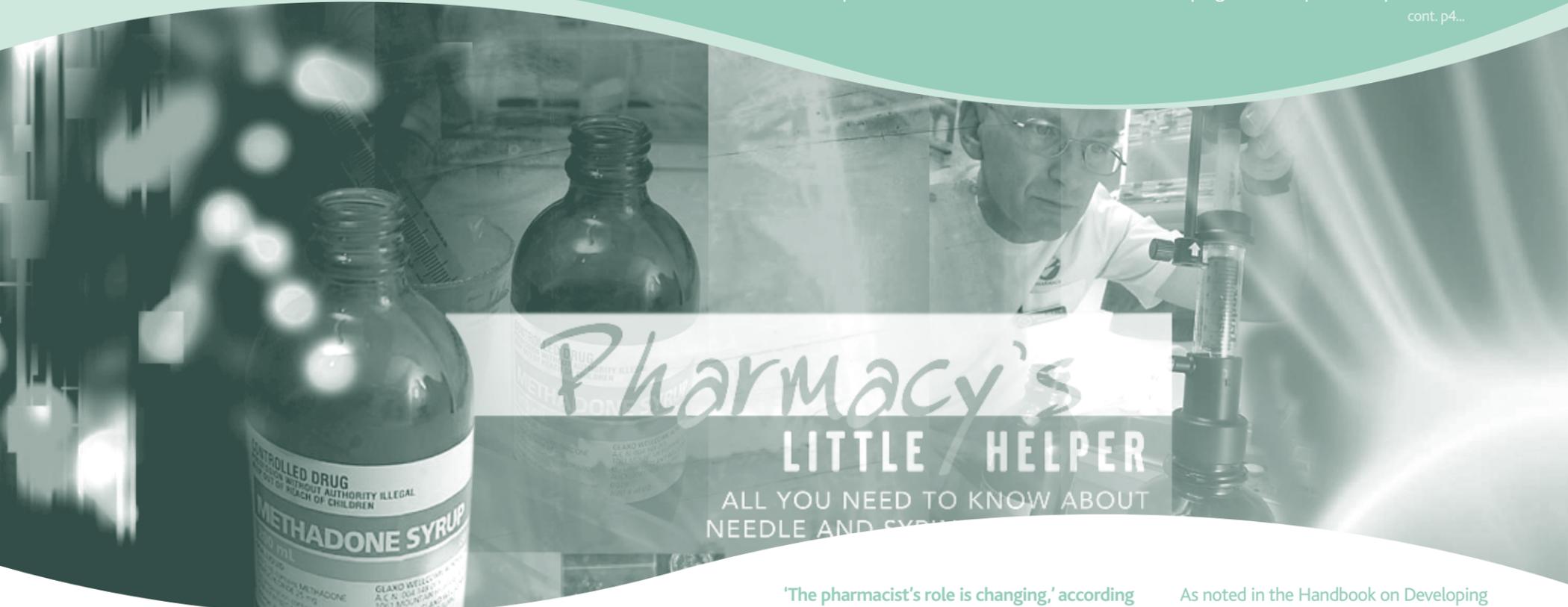
As Annie recalls, prior to NSPs, needles and syringes were only available from a handful of pharmacies in any given city. In those days, possession of needles and syringes without a prescription was illegal in many states and territories. You needed a doctor's prescription to legitimately get needles and syringes from a pharmacy. If you were in a smaller regional centre, you would get what you could when you were in the city and just re-use them until they could not be used anymore.

At this time, there were some doctors who would write the occasional script stating you were diabetic. In Queensland as with other states and territories, there were some pharmacies that would sell needles

and syringes 'under the counter' to people who inject drugs but if you were able to secure such an arrangement you told no one because too many people turning up and asking for injecting equipment could jeopardize the arrangement, reports Annie.

When HIV became an urgent issue, the distribution of sterile needles and syringes was identified as a good public health measure. The first program, a subsidised pharmacy program (the Pharmacy Distribution Scheme, later renamed the Pharmacy Fitpack Scheme), was established in NSW in 1986 to increase access to sterile injecting equipment and to encourage the exchange of used syringes for new ones. This program now operates as part of the

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THE CHANGING ROLE OF PHARMACISTS

'The pharmacist's role is changing,' according to Lorraine Smith, Faculty of Nursing and Ines Krass, Faculty of Pharmacy at the University of Sydney. 'In response to community and healthcare system demands, pharmacists must now take a holistic view of health care, a shift in focus from 'product' (or 'prescription') to 'patient/client'. This shift requires today's pharmacists to have an understanding of the range of human experience during periods of ill health, and good interpersonal communication both within and between professions,' they write in Synergy.

As noted in the Handbook on Developing pharmacy practice - A focus on patient care: 'The traditional role of pharmacists was to manufacture and supply medicines. Today pharmacists face an increasingly complex range of medicines and medical regimes as science advances; but are also required to provide more health care advice to clients than ever before and take responsibility for ensuring people are equipped with the right advice to use medications appropriately. This shift in focus has seen the pharmacist's role evolve to a more patient-centred approach.'

Dean of the Victorian College of Pharmacy, Monash University, Professor Colin Chapman says that while the science is still highly

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Pharmacies working with drug users

Like all members of the community, pharmacists and pharmacy staff hold different views about drug use and how best to respond to it. The attitudes of pharmacists and pharmacy staff toward working with injectors vary enormously as do the motivations for involvement in such services. This article explores some of the barriers to working with injectors. Page 6

State-by-state update

A state-by-state look at pharmacy involvement in Needle & Syringe Programs (NSPs) and pharmacotherapy programs. Page 8

LIAISON AND LINKING PROJECTS

A number of pharmacy liaison projects have been established in recent years to support pharmacies in delivering Needle & Syringe Program (NSP) services. Here are some examples. Page 10