



more cases of HIV prevention you will believe have been achieved.

I am more impressed by the speculation in the second-last paragraph: "Research is under way to determine whether the program could be playing a causative role." I encourage much more research in that area, since the authors are obviously giving our population the message that intravenous drug use somehow has the approval of the medical community, along with government funding.

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[The authors respond:]

Dr. Gutowski raises the question of the role of homosexual activity in spreading HIV among injection drug users (IDUs). Although data from Toronto suggest a much higher prevalence of HIV infection among male IDUs who also report having sex with other men,¹ this represents a small percentage of the overall population of IDUs. It is clear that in Canada and elsewhere the majority of HIV infections among IDUs are occurring in heterosexual users who are infected after sharing needles and other drug paraphernalia, or through heterosexual contact with partners infected by this means. The relatively low estimates of incidence cited in our study are in keeping with infection rates occurring in the latter population.

We interpret Gutowski's primary concern to be the concept of needle exchange and its role in the harm-reduction approach to injection drug use. Research has indicated that needle exchange does not encourage injection drug use or lead users to believe that they are being encouraged to continue their drug use.² Qualitative evidence from an early evaluation of British needle exchange programs showed that they provided a means for IDUs to discuss their concerns

about drug use and treatment options in a user-friendly, nonjudgemental environment; this may be especially beneficial for those not yet ready to approach a treatment program directly, because it will encourage them to take this step.

An economic evaluation like ours must rely on estimates of HIV incidence among IDUs and the impact of needle exchange programs on these users. Unfortunately, there is no definitive way of knowing how many cases might have been prevented except by failing to prevent them. The paper demonstrates that the costs of that approach are high and are likely to more than outweigh the costs of even moderately successful prevention strategies. The goal of harm reduction is not to encourage injection drug use; it is to respect the users and offer them a chance to avoid life-threatening diseases while determining how best to cope with their drug-use issues.

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Antibody screening for celiac disease

In the interesting report "Effectiveness of anti gliadin antibodies as a screening test for celiac disease in children" (*Can Med Assoc J* 1997;157 [5]:527-33), Lucie J. Chartrand and associates report that anti gliadin antibodies can be used to help determine whether patients with suspected celiac disease should undergo duodenal biopsy. However, I would like to point out 2 methodologic limitations that should be considered before their results are applied to other patients.

First, the authors report performing "negative controls," which they describe as assays with the anti-human immunoglobulin antibodies but without serum. The optical densities from the negative control wells were subtracted from the results obtained with each patient's serum. However, this description refers to a blank, not a negative control. A negative control would be used to verify the absence of nonspecific binding of immunoglobulins to the microtitre plate wells. A true negative control would have involved serum from a normal subject, and its results would not have been used in the calculation of the patients' results.

The method for selecting the best cutoff values is also problematic. Using a receiver operating characteristics (ROC) curve, the authors evaluated each possible cutoff point and retained the point that gave the highest sensitivity with an acceptable false-positive rate. It must first be noted that the cutoff points reported are only valid for the assay conditions in this study. If antibodies from another manufacturer were used or the