

# Study Shows Aboriginals Who Inject Drugs Are at Higher Risk for HIV

**One in five Aboriginal people enrolled in a Vancouver study of people who inject drugs became HIV-positive over a five-year period ending in May 2001. This is twice the rate among non-Aboriginal people in the study.**

Aboriginal injection drug users are being infected with HIV at twice the rate of non-Aboriginal users, according to a study by researchers at the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS.<sup>1</sup> The results were obtained from 941 participants in the Vancouver Injection Drug User Study (VIDUS), a longitudinal study of injection drug users recruited in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside between May 1996 and December 2000.

The participants were HIV-negative at the time of recruitment. The study found that by May 2001, 21.1 percent of the Aboriginal injection drug users had become HIV-positive, compared with 10.7 percent of non-Aboriginal users. This elevated risk was present in equal measure among both male and female Aboriginal people.

The study found that frequent use of speedballs (cocaine and heroin combined) was a predictor of HIV seroconversion among both male and female Aboriginal injection drug users. Speedballs were also associated with an increased risk of overdose death. Other predictors of HIV infection among Aboriginal users were going on binges of injection drug use

(among males) and frequent cocaine use (among females).

The researchers concluded that there is an "urgent need for an appropriate and effective public health strategy – planned and implemented in partnership with Aboriginal AIDS

**There is an urgent need for a public health strategy to reduce the harms of injection drug use in this population.**

service organizations and the Aboriginal community – to reduce the harms of injection drug use in this population."<sup>2</sup> The researchers also said that interventions such as needle exchange programs may not be enough to deal with the problem, particularly if they are restrictive in their distribution policies; and that a more comprehensive response is required, including measures to increase the safety of drug injection and of methadone maintenance programs.<sup>3</sup>

The researchers pointed out that at the time they were recruited into the study, none of the Aboriginal men and few of the Aboriginal women were enrolled in methadone treatment programs. The researchers called for increased efforts to identify the barriers to receiving methadone maintenance therapy among Aboriginal people and to explore alternative therapies for opiate addiction.<sup>4</sup>

Aboriginal HIV/AIDS organizations in British Columbia and the rest of Canada have long been concerned about the lack of access to methadone maintenance therapy and the lack of supervised injection sites for Aboriginal injection drug users.

– Kim Thomas

At time of writing, Kim Thomas was National Projects/Programs Consultant for the Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network and correspondent on Aboriginal issues for the *Review*.

<sup>1</sup> KJP Craib et al. Risk factors for elevated HIV incidence among Aboriginal injection drug users in Vancouver: *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 2003; 168: 19-24.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid at 19.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid at 23.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid at 24.