

## Safer tattooing piloted in six federal prisons

**In January of 2005, Correctional Service Canada (CSC) began implementing a safer tattooing pilot program in six federal prisons, one women's and five men's institutions. The pilot phase of the program is expected to last until 31 March 2006.**

According to a CSC memo, “[i]mplementation of this important harm reduction measure is congruent with CSC’s strategic outcome of ‘providing a safe and healthy environment for those living and working in the correctional system’ and contributes to the protection of society.”<sup>1</sup>

Public health research has demonstrated that tattooing in prison is independently associated with hepatitis C infection. In a community setting, tattooing with non-sterile needles has also been associated with HIV transmission.<sup>2</sup>

Tattooing is a recognized part of Canadian prison culture, despite the risk of disease transmission and the fact that up until now it has been illegal in federal prisons. Under the pilot program, funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada, prisoner tattoo artists will be trained in infection prevention and control practices, and will have access to sterile tattooing equipment.

The CSC developed 128 pages of guidelines that cover tattooing in context, operations and availability of tattoo services, the set-up and take-down of the tattoo shop, the tattooist, the client, and blood borne disease training. The pilot program is based on

education for the tattooist and for clients, and safer tattooing practices involving state-of-the-art tattooing equipment and infection control procedures.

The CSC will provide all of the equipment required and select the tattoo artists from among prisoners who apply. The CSC will also supervise the tattoo shop, approve tattoo designs, and institute forms to obtain consent to tattooing. Prisoners will pay CA\$5 per tattoo session.

The pilot program will cost approximately CA\$100,000 per pilot site. The pilot sites are in different regions of the country and include institutions of different security levels. The program will be evaluated at the end of one year. The evaluation will involve interviews with prisoners and staff at the pilot institutions, as well as the analysis of automated data (including data from the CSC’s Infectious Disease Surveillance System) and documentation relevant to establishing the levels of efficiency and effectiveness of the pilot program.

In submissions commenting on an earlier draft of the guidelines, the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network praised the CSC’s initiative on the issue, but criticized the top-down

model which animates the pilot programs. It appears that the CSC did not adequately consult with prisoners or staff in the development, design and implementation of the pilot programs. Moreover, prisoners have only a minimal decision-making role in the ongoing operation of the tattoo shops.

Under the *Corrections and Conditional Release Act*, the CSC is responsible for “the care and custody of inmates.” In 1994, the CSC’s Expert Committee on AIDS and Prisons recommended safer tattooing programs. This recommendation was repeated in reports by the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, the Prisoners’ HIV/AIDS Support Action Network, and the Correctional Investigator of Canada.

– Glenn Betteridge

<sup>1</sup> Copies of the memo, the *CSC Safer Tattooing Practices Initiative Draft Guidelines*, the training plan for pilot sites, and the evaluation framework are on file with the author.

<sup>2</sup> S Panda et al. Risk factors for HIV infection in injection drug users and evidence for onward transmission of HIV to their sexual partners in Chennai, India. *Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome* 2005; 39: 9-15.