

OFFCUTS

As the most potent symbol of an accommodation with illegal drug use in the interests of harm reduction, **syringe exchange** continues to arouse controversy. Hastily interpreted findings from Canada seeming to cast doubt on their anti-HIV record, spread of hepatitis C, and a sometimes less than proactive stance on encouraging addiction treatment and medical care, have given ammunition to the critics. But in a broader perspective these can be seen as the trees obscuring the wood: syringe exchange could work better – but it works. Heavyweight support from the UN and the USA has lent credibility to its role as a crucial element in a strategy to prevent the spread of blood borne diseases, but in both cases the statements have received little publicity.

In a first **position paper** on preventing HIV among drug injectors, agencies across the UN agreed (❶) that "needle exchange programmes have shown reductions in needle risk behaviours and HIV transmission and no evidence of increase into injecting drug use or other public health dangers," though services could do more in the way of "AIDS education, counselling and referral to ... treatment". A **statement** (❷) seemingly omitted from the current US Surgeon General's web site records that former Surgeon General David Satcher (who left office in February 2002) and senior scientists at the US Department of Health and Human Services "unanimously agreed that there is conclusive scientific evidence that syringe exchange programmes, as part of a comprehensive HIV prevention strategy, are an effective public health intervention that reduces the transmission of HIV and does not encourage the use of illegal drugs." President George Bush remains opposed, and federal funding for syringe exchange continues to be blocked.

❶ United Nations. **Preventing the transmission of HIV among drug abusers. A position paper of the United Nations System.** 2000. Download from www.unaids.org/publications/documents/specific/index.html#drug

❷ US Surgeon General. **Evidence-based findings on the efficacy of syringe exchange programs: an analysis from the Assistant Secretary for Health and Surgeon General of the scientific research completed since April 1998.** March 2000.