



Health Un/Care: Missed Opportunities in Pharmacy Interactions with PWID Seeking Sterile Syringes

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Background

In 2020, 7% of new HIV infections within the US were attributed to people who inject drugs (PWID), most occurring in highly population-concentrated areas. Maricopa County, Arizona is one of these areas.

Pharmacies are one of few accessible healthcare systems that PWID encounter, and with lack of coverage by syringe service programs, assuring pharmacy syringe sales is critical to reducing infection-related diseases among PWID.

Methods

A 'secret shopper' syringe purchase study was conducted with 38 pharmacies, geomapped to within 2-miles from drug copping areas in two AZ counties.

Daytime venue sampling was employed, sending 3 different investigators with lived/living drug use experience to pharmacies at different times of day and different weeks.

Each investigator asked to purchase "a bag of 10 syringes" without a prescription. The stated purchase rationale was "to protect myself from HIV and Hepatitis C".

A 24-item instrument measured sales outcome and subjective experience of the pharmacy staff interaction.

Results

Almost half (44.7%) of pharmacies consistently refused to sell syringes, and only 21.1% consistently sold syringes (Table 1).

Two distinct pharmacy staff interactions emerged irrespective of sales outcome. Pharmacies which tended to stigmatize investigators and pharmacies which tended to treat them as customers regardless of sales outcome.

Distinct 'othering' occurred around the syringes themselves as well as the investigators. The purchase rationale (direct statement of need) did not appear to affect sales outcome.

Her tone was very pleasant and friendly... She said they cannot sell them unless I have a prescription....She did, however, say, "You mentioned Hep C, have you been tested for it or anything?" And I said no. And she educated me on the medications (the pharmacy) offered and things like that... And she said, "A lot of insurance cover it now." (Case 047)

Yeah. It just seemed like I was just going in to purchase milk. I want to purchase it and then I purchased it. So it was the same thing. I came in here to purchase syringes and I didn't have to have a good reason except I want them and I made the purchase. So that was great, it normalized syringe purchases. (Case 088)

Pharmacy Staff Interaction

- Two types of staff interactions: negative/positive
- Tone went negative/body language after syringe request
- Stigmatizing language "you people" (NOT customers)
- Clear use of pharmacist discretion
- Hiding behind 'pharmacy policy'

Impact on Investigators

- Shock (given disregard of purchase rationale)
- Disgust and anger (at mistreatment and rejection)
- Sadness (does our health not matter?)
- Internalized stigma (did I cause this rejection?)
- Reinforcing common response to not buy again

Table 1. Pharmacy Characteristics, Arizona pharmacy syringe purchase study, 2022 (N=38)

Pharmacy Type	
Chain	19 (50%)
Food Store	10(26.3%)
Mass Merchandiser	5 (13.2%)
Independent	4 (10.5%)
County	
Maricopa	29 (76.3%)
Pima	9 (23.7%)
Syringe Sales Outcomes	
Always sold syringes (bags or box)	8 (21.1%)
Never sold syringes	17 (44.7%)
Limited sales to box only	3 (7.9%)
Sold at least once (bag or box)	21 (55.3%)
Sold at least twice (bag or box)	11 (28.9%)

References

Meyerson BE, Lawrence CA, Cope SD, Levin S, Thomas C, Eldridge LA, Coles HB, Vadieli N, Kennedy A. *I could take the judgement if you could just provide the service: non-prescription syringe purchase experience in Arizona pharmacies.* BMC Harm Reduction 2019; 16(57):1-9.

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