

Debate over needle program

By Meredith Clisby

THE controversial proposal to begin a needle-and-syringe program inside Canberra's Alexander Maconochie Centre will be discussed at the next meeting of the Kippax Amnesty Group.

Family and Friends for Drug Law Reform (ACT) president Brian McConnell will facilitate debate about whether it is a human right to provide such a program to prisoners.

He said his personal view was that prisoners were punished for their actions by being deprived of their liberty and they should not be given extra punishment inside the centre.

As such they should have the same access to public health services as the rest of the community such as the opportunity to purchase needle and syringe packs like Canberrans can at most pharmacies.

He said while less than 1 per cent of the general population had a blood borne virus, more than 60 per cent of people inside prisons had them.

He considers that the provision of a needle and syringe program is a human right and thinks there is an evidence base in various pieces of ACT legislation that supports this.

The president will discuss this legislation with the Amnesty group as well as Michael Moore's recent report on implementing a needle and syringe program.

Mr McConnell has been the president of the Family and Friends for Drug Law Reform since 1995 when he was part of a Canberra-wide push to deal with the increasing number of

heroin overdose deaths in the Territory. He lost a son to a heroin overdose in 1992.

"We knew nothing about it at the time – heroin, illicit drugs. We were probably like a lot of people in Canberra and Australia, until it affects you you don't know anything about it," Mr McConnell said.

The family was furious about the way he was treated upon being admitted to hospital when he initially overdosed.

Mr McConnell said his son had woken up to find the police standing over his bed wanting to find out details of who had supplied him the drugs.

He discharged himself from hospital, left Canberra and then suffered a fatal heroin overdose.

"He was caught between a rock and a hard place," Mr McConnell said.

"We thought this isn't right, it's not right the police shouldn't be harassing him – our son had a health problem."

He says while the police no longer target people in this way there is still too much money put into law enforcement and more should be provided towards dealing with the health problem.

"If we had evidence based policies and if our policy makers would pay heed to the evidence we wouldn't be in the trouble we are now," he said.

■ The Kippax Amnesty Group will meet at the Kippax Library next Monday, September 12 at 11am.



Family and Friends for Drug Law Reform president Brian McConnell will speak at the next Kippax Amnesty meeting about the proposed needle-and-syringe program inside the Alexander Maconochie Centre.

Picture: Elesia Lee

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the right

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