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AIDS - BERKELEY

December 18, 1991

Senator Quentin Kopp
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Dear Senator Kopp,

I have long respected you as a political leader with the guts to speak out controversial issues. I write to you as a concerned physician to call your attention to the fact that the position you are taking on needle exchange is dead wrong.

There are essentially two schools of thought in the needle exchange debate. One school holds that intravenous drug use is wrong and that if individuals do not stop injecting illicit drugs they deserve to die of AIDS. The second school holds that intravenous drug use is wrong, but that while society may not be able to persuade someone to abandon a dangerous and destructive habit, the individual does not need to die as punishment for his crime.

You are in fact, adopting the first position when you argue that needle exchange will encourage illicit drug use and that a recent New York Times report indicated that the number of people injecting drugs was in fact declining. New York City has 230,000 IV drug users and San Francisco has 12,000. While 10 or 20 percent of this group may stop using intravenous drugs because of fear of AIDS, it is unconscionable to condemn 80% of this number to death from AIDS through the vain hope of scaring them out of an addictive behavior. Medical science has shown in the last century that changing addictive behavior is virtually impossible for all but a very small, highly motivated group of addicts.

I recently returned from a speaking engagement in Sydney Australia and learned that Sydney, a city very similar to San Francisco in both in size and terrain has about the same number of IV drug users as we do. However, in San Francisco, 12% of our IV drug users are now HIV positive while in Sydney, only 4% have been infected. According to every expert I interviewed in Australia, the reason for this dramatic difference is that Sydney has had a needle exchange program for the past four years.

PLEASE RESPOND TO:

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Page 2
Senator Kopp
December 18, 1991

In countries where needle exchange has been implemented, a surprising consequence has been observed. Increasing numbers of IV drug users have come into the system requesting treatment. The reason given for this increase is that for the first time these addicts perceive that those medical officials giving them clean needles are truly concerned about their health and survival and a dialogue develops between the health care establishment and the drug users. This dialogue then leads to trust which then leads to increased numbers of addicts requesting methadone treatment.

I will be happy to discuss this issue with you or members of your staff and would argue that you seriously reconsider your position on this vital issue.

Sincerely yours,

Marcus A. Conant, MD
Former Co-Chair California
AIDS Leadership Committee

MAC/pyp

cc: Mayor Elect Frank Jordan