

## Closing prison tattoo parlours can only cause infectious diseases to spread beyond jails, warns *Leon Mar*

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Public Safety Minister Stockwell Day is facing a crucial and controversial decision on prison tattoo parlours that could reduce the rate of infectious diseases (like HIV and hepatitis C) not only among prisoners, but among the public at large. Evidence and experts suggest his choice is clear: Safer tattooing programs save money and lives and should be implemented in all prisons in Canada.

But political decisions are rarely based on evidence alone.

Will this majority-seeking minority government let ideology get in the way? And will voters, who often do not see the link between prisoners' health and public health, let it happen?

In almost every country, HIV is more prevalent among prisoners than in the general population. In Canada, it's no different: People in prison are 30 times more likely to be infected with hepatitis C (HCV) and seven to 10 times more likely to be infected with HIV than people on the outside.

The lack of sterile tattooing equipment is partly to blame.

As early as 1994, the federal Expert Committee on AIDS and Prisons (a Correctional Service Canada committee) recommended establishing safer tattooing programs to address this problem. Sadly, successive governments ignored both this and other recommendations aimed at stemming the alarming spread of blood-borne diseases in Canadian prisons.

Finally, in September 2005, CSC started a one-year pilot program for safer prison tattoo parlours, funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada. Tattoo shops were set up in six federal prisons, including a women's prison. The shops were run by prisoners and supervised by staff.

Tattoos weren't allowed above the collarbone, below the wrists, or on the skull, and gang tattoos were forbidden.

Prisoners working in the shops received training in infection prevention and control practices, and were taught to be peer health educators.

Now, the prison tattoo shops are closed; it's up to Ottawa to decide whether they're closed for good.

Why, some may ask, can't we just stop tattooing from happening in prisons? Because prohibition has never worked, it's simply driven tattooing underground.

As a result, prison tattooing is done secretly and quickly, often in unhygienic environments with makeshift inks and needles, such as sewing needles, paper clips and twist ties.

Such practices increase the risk of HIV and HCV transmission and the spread of other blood-borne diseases, within the prison system.

This isn't just a problem for prisoners; it's also a problem for the public. When prisoners return to the community, the diseases they've acquired in prison come with them and are spread through sex, drug use and other behaviours.

It follows that tattooing can and should be done safely, regardless of whether it's done in a downtown parlour or in a prison. It's a matter of public health.

Some will say it's fiscally irresponsible for governments to spend taxpayer dollars to pay for prisoners' tattoos. But the fact is, we'll either pay now or we'll pay later.

Each of the six safer prison tattoo pilot sites cost just more than \$100,000 per year. But each case of HIV infection costs roughly \$20,000 per year to treat; for each hepatitis C infection, it's \$25,000. If even just five infections were prevented at each of the six sites, the pilot program will have paid for itself. The lesson here is: Safer prison tattoo programs now make sound economic sense by preventing much costlier public health expenses later.

What of the claim that putting more needles in prisons puts guards and other prison staff at risk? As Jim Motherall, a former prisoner turned prisoner-advocate, points out, if inmates really wanted to use needles as weapons, they could use the makeshift needles they have now, most of which are likely contaminated.

Besides, the fear of needle attacks is statistically unfounded. Between 1997 and 2002, Corrections Canada staff reported just 45 incidents of puncture injuries from prohibited, often improvised tattooing needles. All were accidental.

By eliminating the need to hide tattooing equipment, safer tattoo parlours arguably reduce the likelihood of such accidents. In doing so, the parlours prevent HIV or HCV transmission from prisoners to each other, to prison staff and, eventually, to the public.

Prisoners are sentenced to serve time; they are not sentenced to be infected with fatal, transmissible diseases. The government has a chance to do the right thing, and Canadians should support it.

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*Leon Mar is director of communications of the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, which advocates on the legal and human rights issues raised by HIV/AIDS.*

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