

Needle exchange not on in new jail

By Cathy Alexander

Inmates at Canberra's new jail will be given bleach to wash their syringes but there will be no needle exchange for drug users.

The ACT Government confirmed in its health services plan for the Hume prison, released yesterday, that it would not allow a needle exchange.

Inmates will get free condoms, at least one dental check-up a year, and may get to use tattooing equipment. The plan called for more investigation into providing the equipment; prisoners might even be trained on how to use it.

The decision not to allow a needle exchange has pleased corrections officers, but health groups are disappointed.

The plan presented NSW evidence of high levels of hepatitis C infection and drug use among prisoners. Among female inmates, 64 per cent had hepatitis C, along with 40 per cent of male inmates, while 84 per cent of females and 80 per cent of males used illicit drugs.

Health Minister Katy Gallagher said the new jail, which is human rights-compliant and due to open this year, would not have a needle exchange because it should start from the position of preventing drug use.

The policy would be reviewed after 12 to 18 months to see if an exchange was needed.

Health workers would collect data on drug use and infections. The 200 inmates would have to take part in urine testing for illicit drugs.

Ms Gallagher said bleach was an effective way of preventing the transmission of infections through needles. Some opposed it, because they were concerned about its possible misuse, but the Government would monitor safety issues.

Liberal leader Zed Seselja said giving inmates bleach to clean needles was "a clear admission of defeat from day one".

He said Labor appeared split on the issue of drugs, with the Labor Left keen to bring in a needle exchange in the future.

Vince McDevitt, regional director of the ACT branch of the CPSU, which represents correctional officers, welcomed the decision not to have a needle exchange, but said he was not sure providing bleach to clean needles sent the right message.