Needle and Syringe Program
Online: By-passing stigma and protecting anonymity to preserve health

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Since 1986, Australian Needle and Syringe Programs (NSPs) have been an official strategy to reduce the harms of injecting drug use, including the spread of Hepatitis C and HIV. NSPs provide injecting equipment at no or low cost. Yet barriers to 100% coverage of new equipment per injection persist.
The project.
To identify barriers to accessing new injecting equipment, we used a ‘quick’ ethnography research design comprising participant observation, and interviews and surveys with drug users, NSP managers and front line workers. Key issues were service users’ attitudes to confidentiality and experience of judgment.
The design process.
The design process used service ecology mapping, personas, scenarios, role play and low-fidelity prototyping to analyse research findings and propose a design response.
Victoria has over 400 NSPs in Victoria in the form of dedicated facilities, mobile outreach programs, and services in community health centres, hospitals and pharmacies. Despite this number, in Australia, people choose to re-use or share needles around 14% of the time. User-centred design highlights to governments and existing programs the to understand services from clients’ perspectives in their diversity and complexity.

Governance and Policy Making

Do public services elicit individual behavior?

service-led planning
Public service deliverers are continually confronted by the need to develop and implement culturally and socially inclusive practices and processes. In investigating how to preserve service users’ anonymity in accessing injecting equipment through the NSP system, we identified the experience of judgment as an additional barrier to access. To expand of freedom of choice and equality of access in the NSP system, we looked to ways in which individuals could be more proactive and in control of the process of accessing the equipment they needed.
The NSP literature links coverage of new injecting equipment to harm reduction. It rarely investigates how the nature of service delivery affects the goal of 100% coverage. In researching the Victorian NSP network, we sought to understand how practices and processes across a complex, dispersed system might create practical barriers and affective deterrents for specific service users obtaining new injecting equipment at times.
knowledge creates empathy, empathy enables advocacy

“When they asked me if I was here for steroids that kind of cheered me up a bit. He knows that I’m not a smackhead. I wanted him to know that I was just an ordinary normal person and haven’t got problems.”

- 29-year-old male PWID

There are over 400 NSPs in the Australian State of Victoria. An NSP might be a dedicated facility, a mobile outreach program, or a service in a community health centre, hospital or local pharmacy. NSPs serve a diversity of people with varied behaviours, expectations, motivations and values in relation to accessing injecting equipment. Despite the number of NSPs in Australia, around 14% of the time people choose to re-use or share needles. Understanding the range of issues and perspectives informing service design in the NSP space required robust research, engaging diverse stakeholders. It needed a self-reflexive design praxis that challenged stereotyped thinking about injecting drug use and people who inject drugs (PWIDs), as well as working methods up to the task of accommodating complexity.
NSP Online: an integrated online platform for distributing injecting equipment by mail. The confidential service provides a new access channel to injecting equipment, moving Victoria further towards 100% coverage of new equipment per injection. It offers accurate, comprehensive drug education, scope for online support and referral to treatment programs that service users can access anonymously at their convenience without the experience of judgment, real or perceived.
The project integrated experiential learning in the area of service innovation with the fulfilment of community need. Students gained professional and research skills, and developed their sense of empathy for the diversity and situation of service users, becoming strong advocates for their needs and interests. The project partner gained insight into the value of service design in auditing and improving the delivery of community services.
Close collaboration with the client during a four hour experience design workshop was crucial to sharing critical information on the NSP system and its approaches to harm reduction. Synthesising design research as personas and scenarios was vital to presenting the new service proposals to our project partner.