Reviewer's report

Title: Access to syringes for HIV prevention for injection drug users in St. Petersburg, Russia: syringe purchase test study

Version: 2 Date: 27 November 2012

Reviewer: Danielle German

Reviewer's report:

This paper explored pharmacy access to sterile syringes in St. Petersburg using a combination of methods. The research questions are well-defined and important ones, particularly for the local context. The findings are valuable for continued advocacy and prevention efforts. More detailed comments are included below.

Major Compulsory Revisions

1. The first analysis examines the hypothesis that HIV prevalence is higher in areas with lower pharmacy density. When no correlation is found, the authors conclude that pharmacy density does not play a role in the HIV epidemic. It is surprising that the authors do not explore or even discuss alternate mechanisms that could be very relevant, such as syringe sharing.

2. A second analysis examines experiences with syringe purchase in pharmacies among injection drug users. These findings are useful, but the analysis lacks depth and it is difficult to interpret the extent of variation in experiences. For example, did women or men experience purchasing differently? Newer versus older users? How much did visual cues of possible injection drug use vary across respondents and experiences with pharmacy discrimination?

3. A final analysis assessed the extent to which research staff could purchase syringes in pharmacies using a standardized script. The authors conclude that a relatively high proportion of pharmacies were willing to sell syringes, while also highlighting the important finding that the remaining pharmacies did not. They note that one limitation is that the staff may not have been as easily identified as IDUs since they lack physical cues. This seems a major limitation of the study. Given the role of IDU stigma as a barrier to pharmacies selling syringes to IDUs, it seems critical to be able to identify the extent to which syringes are available to actual IDUs, inclusive of the wide range of the physical and emotional characteristics that may be present. Perhaps the authors can provide more information about the study staff and any efforts to assess this issue within the qualitative component and within the script exercise.

Minor Essential Revisions

1. It would be helpful to have more information about the two selected research districts included in the text rather than limited to the supplementary table. How
proximate are these to IDU communities? What is the demographic make-up of these communities relative to the rest of the city? What is the HIV prevalence in these communities?

2. It would also be helpful for the authors to provide additional information about how pharmacies were identified, e.g. search terms used on Google.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.