

CASE STUDY

Drugstores and drug addicts

In the second half of the 1980s in Italy, when AIDS was spreading rapidly, it was proposed that automatic sterile syringe dispensers be installed in public places. The proposal provoked heated debate.

Some administrators, social workers and citizens' groups opposed the scheme on the grounds that drugstores could adequately perform the function. Other practitioners were instead in favor of automatic syringe dispensers. They cited psychological factors (shyness, fear, anxiety) and sociological ones (identity, fear of being placed on file) as the probable reasons why drug addicts were reluctant to use drugstores. And this is what came about. But not for the reasons cited (note this good example of an intervening variable).

It was discovered that drug addicts did not get their syringes from pharmacies for a reason which was both banal and very practical. The ceremonial of many users comprised the maxim: 'getting the syringe before you get the smack brings bad luck.' Because addicts usually bought their heroin in the late evening after they had spent the entire day scraping the money together, by the time they set about obtaining a syringe the drugstores had closed. Because they could not get hold of a sterile syringe, they continued with their usual social practice (or ceremonial) of using another addict's dirty syringe.