

Program head rips lack of progress fighting drugs

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The head of the country's largest drug treatment program said yesterday that failure to provide treatment on demand to all heroin addicts who seek help has aggravated three of the most serious problems facing America today, AIDS, crime and homelessness.

In testimony before the Select Committee on Narcotics Abuse and Control, Dr. Robert G. Newman, president of Beth Israel Medical Center, said that in the six years since he last appeared before the committee "our nation

has made no progress in addressing the plague of drug addiction and its associated horrors; indeed, the situation has reached unprecedented proportions."

Quoting from a 1988 report of the General Accounting Office, which found that in New York clinics only 2 to 5 percent of patients in treatment for more than six months were using heroin, Dr. Newman said the effectiveness of methadone maintenance has been proven "unequivocally."

"Within just six months, between 95 percent and 98 percent of former hard-core, long-term addicts, who had been self-injecting from three to five times per day, every day, had given up heroin, according to the GOA," Newman said.

In 1965, Beth Israel Medical Center pioneered the use of methadone, a synthetic narcotic that in appropriate dosages blocks both the craving for and the euphoric effect of heroin. More than 20 years of studies have proven that methadone maintenance is a proven way to interrupt heroin

addiction.

Newman, who for more than 20 years has advocated providing drug treatment "on demand" to any heroin addict who seeks treatment, said failure to provide such treatment condemns the addict to continued criminal activity.

Providing methadone maintenance, however, gives the addict the chance to end his physical dependency on heroin, and the criminal activity necessary to support the habit, he said.

To demonstrate that treatment on demand can be effective, Beth Israel Medical Center received permission from the Federal Drug Administration in 1987 to establish an "interim clinic" that provides methadone without the counseling and other services mandated by the federal government. On several occasions in the past few months, Newman has argued that this clinic is the only alternative for addicts who cannot be accommodated in existing programs.

"Everyone knows what the thwarted applicants do while awaiting enrollment," Newman

said. "They shoot drugs, three or four times a day, thus continuing the highest risk behavior associated with the spread of AIDS."

A three-year study of the interim clinic at Beth Israel has shown a marked reduction in the incidence of AIDS transmission due to reduction in needle use among the former addicts.

"As you consider the arguments against interim treatment," he said, "you must consider this, the only alternative, and decide which makes more sense for the individual and the general society."

Addressing another major concern of the committee, Newman acknowledged that methadone diversion — a black market sale of methadone by patients — is a problem.

"Illicit traffic of methadone will continue as long as there is unmet demand for this medication by heroin addicts who ... recognize that it can spell the difference between life and death, but who cannot obtain it legally," he said.

He urged the committee to compare the "issue of methadone

diversion against the reality that at least a million illicit transactions in heroin, in cocaine and in a host of other illicit drugs takes place every day in New York.

"The quantity of illegal sales on street corners of methadone pales in comparison with the sale of illegal drugs," he said.

Newman also said the mistaken belief that methadone treatment is just substituting one addiction for another has seriously hampered the nation's ability to cope with its drug addiction problem.

Such a belief has led some treatment centers to lower daily dosages so that the addict still craves — and uses — heroin.

Beth Israel Medical Center treats nearly 8,000 patients a year at its 23 methadone maintenance treatment programs in New York City. Their studies show that 70 percent of patients have been in treatment for more than two years and 47 percent more than five years, an indication of the program's stability and effectiveness. More than 60 percent of the patients in methadone treatment are employed or in school.