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Peer Led NSP

My name is Tam Miller and I'm born and bred in Edinburgh. I was an injecting drug user in the 1980s when Edinburgh was known as the AIDS capital of Europe. By 1988 I was getting really sick of going to friends' funerals.

I was looking to make a difference for my community. Edinburgh still didn't have needle exchange at that time. I met a friend called John 'ZZ Top' who had just come back from London with 2000 sets of needles and syringes donated by an English needle exchange.

John shared half of the syringes with me so we could both help our peer networks. I started giving out injecting equipment from my house. This proved very successful and my friend started getting me more needles and syringes so I could continue the scheme.

Some of my peers asked if they could also run peer needle exchanges and eventually four of us ran them from our houses. It was still illegal at this time to give out needles and syringes in this part of Scotland and this risked incurring a charge of complicity to commit murder in theory at least although no-one was prosecuted in practice.

After a few weeks a local drug squad officer asked me why so many people were coming in and out of my block of flats. The police knew I was a drug user but I had no history of dealing. I told the police officer what I was doing and he was OK with it and allowed me to continue. He saw me as acting responsibly in the interest of my peers.

This illegal peer NSP programme continued for two years until Edinburgh started legal needle exchange in 1991. This came in the form of a mobile needle exchange bus. When it first arrived some local people complained and even threw bricks at the bus. Me and some other well known local users sat on the bus drinking tea and coffee with the staff showing the local community that the service was supported and needed by local users. After a while it just blended into the local area. Importantly it gave us access to more needles and syringes so we could give them out at night and at the weekends when the NSP was closed.

This shows how peer needle exchange started before professional services but then peers went onto to support the new NSPs while also helping to extend access to injecting equipment outside normal work hours.