

# Surge in Glasgow HIV infection rate largest in 30 years

Marc Horne

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New figures show that the number of injecting drug users in the city diagnosed with the virus has risen by 600 per cent in the past year

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The doctor whose work inspired *Trainspotting* has warned that Glasgow is experiencing its biggest rise in HIV infection for three decades.

New figures show that the number of injecting drug users diagnosed with the virus has risen by 600 per cent in the past year, with almost 80 new cases being recorded in the city since 2015.

Roy Robertson, the GP at the centre of the Aids-related epidemic in the 1980s, said that the outbreak constituted a public health emergency and wants plans put in place urgently to open the UK's first legal heroin injection rooms in the city.

Health officials meeting last week heard that attempts to open the "safe" facility in Glasgow were being hampered by the lack of a suitable site.

Dr Robertson, now a professor of addiction medicine at the University of Edinburgh, said that the situation in Glasgow, caused by increased needle sharing among addicts, reminded him of the desperate conditions that inspired Irvine Welsh to write his novel about the Edinburgh drug-injecting scene.

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He claims that a combination of cutbacks in addiction services and complacency has meant that addicts are once again sharing needles and shunning medical treatment.

It was thought that HIV had stabilised in Glasgow, with an average of ten or fewer new cases being recorded for many years.

NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde (NHSGGC) estimates that the lifetime cost of treating those diagnosed with HIV will be almost £30 million. In addition, a study showed that the accident and emergency cost of treating Glasgow's known addict community was £1.7 million between 2014 and 2016.

"There is a minor epidemic of HIV infection in Glasgow for the first time in 30 years," said Dr Robertson.



Dr Roy Robertson is now a professor of addiction medicine at the University of Edinburgh

KARL MANSFIELD/PA WIRE

“For almost two years, we have been saying that [dealing with] this must be an emergency priority, but it has still not happened. You can’t help thinking that if this had been a plane crash or an outbreak of typhoid then things would have been mobilised.”

Dr Robertson, who has worked in Muirhouse, the Edinburgh community that became synonymous with heroin and HIV in the 1980s, feels that there are parallels between the situation then and now. “There is an increase in the amount of heroin available for the first time in years and the purity seems to be going up,” he said.

“Yet around 50 per cent of people who are thought to be at risk of blood-borne viruses and who are injecting drugs are not in treatment. That’s very similar to 1980.”

David Liddell, chief executive officer of the Scottish Drugs Forum, agreed that there was a desperate need to address Glasgow’s HIV crisis. He said: “The outbreak seems to have begun among people who injected in the city centre and has moved rapidly over the last two years.”

Their support for supervised injection spaces and an increased supply of clean needles was backed by Alison Thewliss, the MP for Glasgow Central. She said: “The sad fact is that Glasgow has a public drug-injecting population of approximately 500 people who are extremely vulnerable.

“I’ve seen with my own eyes people injecting in broad daylight near to my office at Glasgow Cross. Dirty needles are regularly being discarded and it’s becoming a major public health risk. I can see no other realistic option but to move towards a supervised and safe injecting facility.”

NHSGGC hoped that the city’s first injecting gallery, which would replicate facilities pioneered in Vancouver, Sydney and Paris, would open early next year. However, a meeting of Glasgow’s Integration Joint Board, which has health board and social services members, heard that the search for a site was continuing and there were still outstanding legal issues.



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