

end. It's usually an urgent or unusual case reported telephonically to my department, venereal disease control, by a local hospital. On this Friday afternoon, my supervisor sends me to interview a young woman hospitalized because of disseminated gonorrhoea, an uncommon complication of this disease.

The moment I introduce myself in her hospital room, she blurts out: "Whoever heard of gonorrhoea of the elbow? I don't have sex with my elbows!" Being both young women with a good sense of humor, we laugh at this preposterous idea. Very relaxing.

I explain that gonorrhoea occasionally makes its way from genital organs into the blood stream, setting up housekeeping in the synovial fluid in joints like knees and elbows. Although I'm tempted to ask her with whom she's been rubbing elbows, I concentrate on having her identify sexual partners, since some are likely to be infected without obvious symptoms.

And yes, I make it in time to rub elbows as customary with my coworkers at a local bar for Friday happy hour.

### Every Tom, Dick, and Harry

George, nearly 60 years old, is one of the first volunteers for our study on how injection drug users recall the people they shoot drugs with. He's referred to our study from another public health study on injection drug use. His decades of injecting drugs and cerebral, candid manner make me think of him as the wise godfather of the local scene.

When I ask him to estimate the number of people with whom he's injected drugs during the last 2 years, George answers: "about a thousand" and explains that "I know everybody in this fucking town and all of the dope addicts". When I ask him to list as many injection partners as he can by name, he balks: "I can't answer this question. I refuse to tackle it, it's just too big... it's not the point that I don't want to identify 'em or tell the right straight thing about it, but like you can just start writing first names down and that would cover (it)... naming Charlie and Joe and Tom and Dick and Harry, this, this would be the whole situation right here".

George describes how he typically injects with others he knows only by face and previous interactions, and

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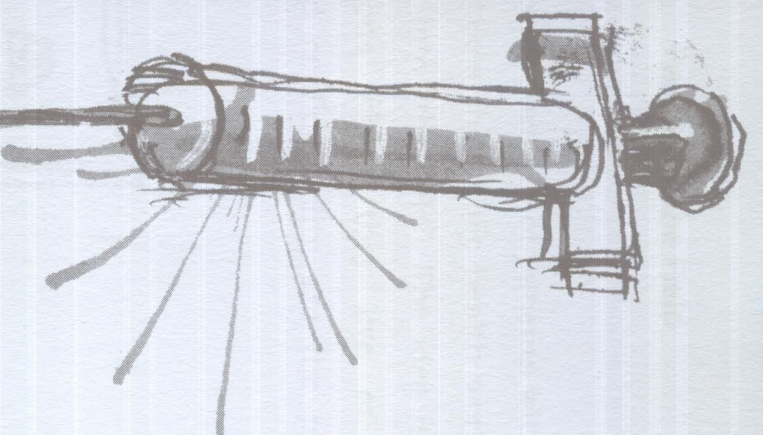


that even street names are not exchanged. After I further encourage him, he eventually lists 22 by first name.

Near the end of the interview he schools me by revealing his secrets to success as a drug addict: always inject safely (in ways that prevent exposure to others' blood); interact anonymously with other addicts (so they can't identify you to police or someone with ill intent); never commit a crime to support drug use (because drug use is not possible in jail); share your drugs (so others will share when you have none); and simply keep yourself together when you cannot get drugs (live to use drugs; don't use drugs to live).

Despite a long history of injection with innumerable partners, I suspect he survives as well as he does precisely because he's lived by these principles.

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*Vignettes from the  
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Edited By

John J. Potterat

Nancy E. Spencer

Stephen Q. Muth



CREATESPACE  
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