Rapid Assessment of Needle and Syringe Types Used by People Who Inject Drugs in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
SUGGESTED CITATION

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DISCLAIMER
The authors’ views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Agency for International Development or the United States Government.


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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Programme on HIV/AIDS</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HDS</td>
<td>High Dead Space</td>
<td>UNODC United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDU</td>
<td>Injecting Drug Users</td>
<td>USAID United States Agency for International Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LDS</td>
<td>Low Dead Space</td>
<td>VAAC Vietnam Administration for HIV/AIDS Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAC</td>
<td>Provincial AIDS Committee</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>PSI</td>
<td>Population Services International</td>
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<tr>
<td>PWID</td>
<td>People Who Inject Drugs</td>
<td>VND Vietnam Dong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNAIDS</td>
<td>Joint United Nations</td>
<td>WHO World Health Organization</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
BACKGROUND

There are an estimated 273,000 people who inject drugs in Vietnam, but only about 20 percent of them receive harm reduction services (MOH-VAAC: Vietnam HIV/AIDS Estimates and Projection 2007-2012, Hanoi 2009). Injecting drug users (IDUs) account for up to 65 percent of people living with HIV in Vietnam. National HIV prevalence among male IDU has been estimated to be 23.1 percent. Furthermore, sharing syringes and needles is common—an estimated 45 percent of IDUs in Hanoi alone have shared needles (HIV/STI Integrated Biological and Behavioral Surveillance (IBBS) in Vietnam, 2009).

With funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)/U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and the U.K. Department for International Development (DFID), Population Services International (PSI) has provided HIV prevention services to Vietnamese people who inject drugs (PWID) since 2005. In 2011, the USAID Social Marketing for HIV Prevention Project, implemented by PSI/Vietnam, planned a rapid market assessment to identify needle and syringe types commonly used by people who inject drugs in Vietnam. Recent and emerging evidence suggests needle and syringe types may significantly affect transmission rates of HIV, Hepatitis and other blood-borne viruses. The assessment was designed to inform improvements in national harm reduction efforts among IDUs, including efforts to motivate the use of low dead space (LDS) syringes.

INTRODUCTION

As early as 1991, experts identified needle and syringe type as a critical factor related to transmission of HIV and other blood-borne viruses. (Grund, JP., Stern L., 1991, Residual blood in syringes: size and type of syringe are important. AIDS, 12, 1532-1533.) Recent research conducted by William Zule and others has shown that, while all types of needles and syringes retain some fluid, syringes with detachable needles tend to retain much more fluid compared to syringes with needles that do not detach. Low Dead Space (LDS) syringes retain an average of 2 micro-liters of fluid, compared with High Dead Space (HDS) syringes, which retain an average of 84 micro-liters of fluid. (Zule, W., Ticknor-Stellato, K., Desmond, D., Vogtsberger, K., 1997, Evaluation of needle and syringe combinations. Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndromes and Human Retrovirology, 14:3, 294-295).

In 2011, to help inform improvements in IDU programming in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the Eurasian Harm Reduction Network compiled a report on needle and syringe types used by people who inject drugs in that region (Ibragimov, U. & Latypov, A., 2012, Needle and syringe types used by people who inject drugs in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: Key findings from a rapid situation assessment. Vilnius: Eurasian Harm Reduction Network). In February 2011, the USAID Social Marketing for HIV Prevention Project implemented by PSI/Vietnam, conducted a similar rapid assessment in Vietnam. The purpose of the Vietnam market assessment was to inform the IDU programming supported by the Social Marketing Project during the remaining contract period and contribute to national efforts to expand access to LDS syringes.

As early as 2007, international public health agencies including the WHO, UNAIDS and UNODC suggested providing people who inject drugs with "a single-unit needle and syringe such as the 1ml diabetic disposable syringe, as 'attached' units provide less opportunity for HIV to survive in dried blood than do separate needles and syringes" (WHO, UNAIDS & UNODC, Guide to starting and managing needle and syringe programmes. Geneva: World Health Organization, 2007). As Ibragimov summarizes the situation, Zule’s research means that “HDS syringes can retain up to 1,000 more HIV virus than LDS syringes after rinsing, indicating that PWID who share HDS syringes with HIV-positive injecting partners are many times more likely to become infected than if they shared LDS syringes. (Ibragimov, p.7).

In the context of clear evidence that LDS reduce the likelihood of transmission of HIV, Hepatitis C and other blood-borne viruses, WHO, UNAIDS, UNODC guidelines and the Ibragimov report recommend future efforts to expand access to LDS be informed by a solid understanding of:

1. Where and how PWID obtain needles and syringes (needle/syringe exchange programs, pharmacies, peers, the black market etc.);
2. Types of drugs PWID are injecting in a given locality and the volumes of liquid typically required to dissolve drugs;
3. Needs and preferences of PWID in terms of specific needle and syringe combinations, as influenced by a range of factors; and

In February 2012, the USAID Social Marketing for HIV Prevention Project conducted a rapid assessment of the needle and syringe situation in Vietnam with the above evidence-base and recommendations in mind. The findings from the assessment are
outlined in this report. These findings will be used to inform social marketing for IDUs during the remaining contract period as well as complementary national IDU programming.

**METHODOLOGY**

From February 19-28, 2012, the USAID Social Marketing for HIV Prevention Project conducted a rapid assessment of the needle and syringe situation in Vietnam, including the activities outlined below.

**PSI/VIETNAM ASSESSMENT STAFF**

Rob Gray, PSI’s Injecting Drug Use Technical Expert, worked with four main PSI/Vietnam staff members to plan and complete the assessment.

1. Nguyen Minh Tuan (Sales Manager, PSI/Vietnam)
2. Bui To Van (Program Manager, PSI/Vietnam)
3. Mr. Tran Van Tinh (Program Coordinator, PSI/Vietnam)
4. Josselyn Neukom (Country Director, PSI/Vietnam)

**LOCATION**

The assessment was conducted in Hanoi (Feb 20-22 & 25-28) and Ho Chi Minh City (Feb 23-24).

**GOVERNMENT & STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS**

The following stakeholders were met and interviewed at least once during the period of the assessment: VAAC and Ho Chi Minh City PAC, USAID Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City offices, CDC Hanoi, WHO, FH 360, DKT, SCDI, the Pathways Project implemented by RTI and Health Policy Initiative Project implemented by Abt Associates.

The following Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) were visited: Cat Trang (Hanoi), Gach dau dong (Hanoi), Cuoc song moi (Ho Chi Minh) and Ban, Toi va Chung ta (Ho Chi Minh).

The following commercial partners were interviewed: Xuan Hoa (Hanoi Needle Distributor), Rang Dong (Ho Chi Minh Needle Distributor), B. Braun Vietnam Co., Ltd. (BBVN) (Needle Manufacturer/Distributor, Hanoi Office), Ngoc Khanh Medical Wholesale Market (Hanoi).

**PHARMACIES**

Interviews were conducted with 18 pharmacies, including 11 in Hanoi and 7 in Ho Chi Minh City.

**SHOOTING GALLERIES**

The assessment team visited 3 shooting galleries during the assessment, including two in Hanoi (Long Bien Bridge & Cau Den District Public Park) and one in Ho Chi Minh City (District 4 Foot Bridge).

**KEY FINDINGS**

**SHOOTING GALLERIES**

The assessment team visited shooting galleries in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City to collect physical evidence regarding types of needles and syringes being used by people who inject drugs in Vietnam.

**HANOI SHOOTING GALLERIES**

**SHOOTING GALLERY**

Long Bien Bridge Hanoi

100 percent of the discarded syringes found in the 2 shooting galleries visited in Hanoi were HDS syringes. At the Long Bien Bridge shooting gallery, the assessment team found approximately 20 discarded syringes. And at the Cau Den Bridge shooting gallery, approximately 37 discarded syringes were found.

**BLOOD IN THE DEAD SPACE**

Long Bien Bridge, Hanoi

100% of the 20 discarded syringes found were High Dead Space 3mL

There was absolutely no evidence of any LDS syringe use among IDUs in Hanoi, based on the assessment team’s visits to Hanoi shooting galleries. Neither LDS syringes nor discarded LDS packaging were found.

The assessment team took photographs of discarded HDS syringes collected to demonstrate the large quantities of visible blood retained in the “dead space” of HDS syringes.
By contrast, 100 percent of the approximately 25 discarded syringes found in the Ho Chi Minh City shooting gallery at the District 4 Foot Bridge were LDS syringes. All LDS collected at the HCMC shooting gallery were manufactured by BBVN.

Most of the discarded syringes were Vinahankook High Dead Space syringes.

100% of discarded syringes were BBVN Low Dead Space.

No blood visible in the used Low Dead Space syringe.
In contrast to the photographs of discarded HDS syringes in Hanoi, photographs of discarded LDS syringes collected in Ho Chi Minh City do not include visible retained blood. While some blood is almost certainly retained in parts of the LDS, the contrast is striking between the quantity of visible blood retained in HDS syringes collected in Hanoi HDS syringes compared to the lack of visible blood in Ho Chi Minh LDS syringes.¹

### MARKET ANALYSIS: SYRINGES COMMONLY AVAILABLE IN THE VIETNAMESE MARKET

The assessment found five different syringes widely available in the Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City markets, as described below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syringe</th>
<th>HDS syringe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vinahankook 3mL</td>
<td>Detachable needle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Manufactured in Vietnam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Manufactured by Vinahankook Medical Supplies Co., Ltd, Ngoc Hoi, Thanh Tri, Hanoi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Produced for commercial sales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comes in 3ml &amp; 5ml</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Retail price from 1000-1500 VND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consumer feedback: Generally positive. Hanoi PWID report they like the detachable needle, which makes it easier to hide (i.e. in cigarette packages)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Note: This syringe dominates the Hanoi market and appears to be the most commonly used syringe by Hanoi drug users. The Vinahankook 3mL was the most common syringe found in Hanoi shooting galleries.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syringe</th>
<th>Unknown Dead Space</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tiankang 1mL</td>
<td>When fully extended, the plunger on this syringe pushes into and partly fills the “dead space.” But visual examination reveals still some “dead space” even with the plunger fully extended.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Detachable needle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Manufactured in China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Manufactured by Tiankang Medical Products Co Ltd., Tianchang City, Anhui Province.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This syringe is produced for free distribution. Procurement is done by the Government of Vietnam with funds from World Bank.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comes in 1ml</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The product is meant for free distribution, but was found for sale at 2 Hanoi pharmacies visited at an average retail price of around 1,500 VND.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consumer feedback: Hanoi drug users noted that sometimes the needles are dull and cause scarring. The plunger sometimes is not fit properly and can leak drugs. But they like the detachable needle, making it easier to hide.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syringe</th>
<th>Vikimco 3mL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Detachable needle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Manufactured in Vietnam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Manufactured by Vikimco, 150 duong14/9, Phuong 5, TP Vinh Long, 84.07038209381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Produced for sale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comes in 1mL &amp; 3mL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Retail price from 1000-1500 VND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consumer feedback: Hanoi PWID report they like the detachable needle, which makes it easier to hide (i.e. in cigarette packages).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Note: We found several discarded Vikimco wrappers in the Hanoi shooting galleries visited.</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syringe</th>
<th>Vihaco 3mL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Detachable needle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Manufactured in Vietnam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Manufactured by Vihaco Syringe and Needle Factory, 7E/2E. KNC Dinh Tran, Bac Giang, Dien Toai, 0240-3661-568</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Produced for free distribution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comes in 1mL &amp; 3mL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Retail price from 1000-1500 VND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consumer feedback: Hanoi PWID report they like the detachable needle, which makes it easier to hide (i.e. in cigarette packages).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Note: We found several discarded Vihaco wrappers in the Hanoi shooting galleries visited, indicating that it is being used by Hanoi drug users.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ It is important to note that there is nothing inherently unsafe about so-called “High Dead Space” syringes, as long as they are not being re-used. For example, in a medical setting with proper safety controls to ensure no second use, HDS syringes are an appropriate and safe medical device.
In summary, the assessment found the following information regarding needle/syringe types commonly used by PWID in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City as of February 2012:

1. 5 main syringes were found available at distributors, wholesalers, pharmacies, CSOs, and shooting galleries;
2. Only one LDS syringe was found at shooting galleries and pharmacies in HCM – the BBVN Omnican;
3. All other syringes commonly distributed/sold and used by PWID were HDS;
4. All syringes being distributed for free to PWID were HDS;
5. PWID have many complaints about the syringes procured for free distribution, especially that the needles are sometimes dull and the plungers sometimes leak.

FIELD VISITS TO PHARMACIES TO INVESTIGATE HDS AND LDS SYRINGE AVAILABILITY

The assessment team visited 11 private-sector pharmacies in Hanoi and 7 in Ho Chi Minh City, all in areas close to shooting galleries. None of the 11 pharmacies visited in Hanoi stocked LDS—all 11 sold HDS syringes exclusively. In contrast, all 7 Ho Chi Minh City pharmacies sold both HDS and LDS syringes.

Every pharmacy visited in Ho Chi Minh City carried the BBVN LDS. The Ho Chi Minh pharmacists, like the Hanoi pharmacists, were not aware that LDS have a reduced risk of HIV transmission compared to HDS. Pharmacists interviewed confirmed that the needle manufacturer, the distributor and the wholesaler staff had ever mentioned the reduced HIV transmission advantage of the BBVN or other LDS.

Pharmacists were surprised by and appreciated the information regarding the reduced HIV transmission risk associated with LDS. Many committed to encouraging injecting drug-using customers to use LDS syringes more. Pharmacists in Ho Chi Minh City were aware of drug users’ preference for the BBVN LDS “red tipped” syringe. They reported that drug users preferred the “red tipped” syringe because it tends to be sharper and to leak less than other products. HCM-based pharmacists reported the main reason why some drug users did not buy the BBVN red tipped syringe was the slightly lower price of the HDS syringes.

BBVN LOW DEAD SPACE SYRINGES

BBVN 3ml Omnican LDS syringe dominates the HCM needle market.

Every pharmacy visited in Ho Chi Minh City carried the BBVN LDS. The Ho Chi Minh pharmacists, like the Hanoi pharmacists, were not aware of the fact that LDS syringes are associated with a higher risk of HIV transmission, and were not aware of the BBVN “red tipped” syringe or other LDS brands. When asked why they did not sell LDS syringes, Hanoi pharmacy staff said that they were unfamiliar with the product. When asked if drug users ever complained about the lack of syringe options, pharmacists reported they were unaware of such complaints, and that—in their opinion—drug users are willing to purchase whatever syringes are available.

2 We heard anecdotal evidence of a small pilot program run by Medicine du Monde to distribute LDS syringes for free in one district of Ho Chi Minh City, but the pilot was small and had already ended.
“friendly pharmacy” logo was prominently displayed and a large number of referral cards for HIV testing was available, but the pharmacy was stocked out of all syringes (priced or free.)

FRIENDLY PHARMACY?
Near Long Bien Bridge, Hanoi

Again, the sample size of pharmacies visited was small. And of the 18 pharmacies visited, only 2 were operating any activities as part of the friendly pharmacy program. Of the two visited, one was distributing a HDS for free, and the other had no syringes of any type.

DEVELOPING PHARMACY LDS ADVOCATES
Approximately half of all pharmacists visited were willing to sell to drug users and recognized the public health benefits of providing them with clean injecting equipment. Many pharmacists, on the other hand, expressed a discomfort selling syringes to drug users. Some reported that they would refuse to sell to drug users, while others reported that they would sell to drug users, but would charge them a higher price for the syringes — at prices as much as 100% higher than the actual retail price in an attempt to discourage IDU customers.

None of the pharmacists were aware that syringes with more dead space have a higher risk of HIV transmission. When given brief information on the topic by a skilled communicator (PSI/Vietnam’s Sales Manager, Nguyen Minh Tuan), many pharmacists expressed a willingness to pass on this information to drug users who came to buy syringes. Even the “unfriendly pharmacists,” who at first said they were not willing to sell to drug users at all, often changed their attitude after receiving brief education on the topic and expressed willingness to help spread the information and products to drug users in the future.

UNFRIENDLY PHARMACIES
Provider Behavior Change Can Work
Ho Chi Minh Pharmacy

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TRADE MARKETING: PROVIDER BEHAVIOR CHANGE

3:10pm
“We don’t sell to drug users here.”

3:12pm
“No one told me my syringes could be helping spread HIV. Maybe I can help.”

LEAKAGE OF FREE PRODUCT INTO THE PRIVATE SECTOR
At 2 of 18 pharmacies visited (both of which were in Hanoi), the assessment team found syringes for sale that were meant for free distribution. While it is difficult to generalize based on a sample of 18 pharmacies visited, it seems reasonable to conclude that some leakage of free product into commercial outlets is occurring.

LEAKAGE OF FULLY-SUBSIDIZED NEEDLES INTO THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Some donor-funded needles meant for free distribution are for sale in pharmacies. Approximately 1 of 10 pharmacies visited were selling needles meant for free distribution.

MARKET DISTORTION & PUBLIC HEALTH HARM GENERATED BY FREE N/S DISTRIBUTION SCHEMES
At one “friendly pharmacy” visited in Ho Chi Minh City, the pharmacy was selling LDS BBVN syringes for 2,000 VND from behind the counter, but giving away HDS syringes for free through a box sitting in front of the pharmacy (see photo on next page.)
During an interview with a pharmacist, 2 different clients came on motorcycles to the pharmacy, took a handful of free HDS syringes from the box, and quickly rode away. Although provision of free sterile equipment via pharmacies can be a very positive public health intervention, if only HDS are available for free, this is likely to dis-incentivize purchase and use of LDS.

The syringe social marketing program being implemented in 3 provinces in the south sells a branded HDS syringe to drug users at a subsidized price (500 VND), aiming to increase use by reducing the price. Selling a subsidized HDS syringe for 500 VND is likely to dis-incentivize PWID from purchasing the safer, non-subsidized BBVN LDS product for 2,000 VND.

SYRINGE ACCESS AFTER PHARMACIES CLOSE
Late night access to syringes is an important issue in both Hanoi and HCM City. Drug users in both cities reported difficulty obtaining syringes after pharmacies close. Government representatives from VAAC and HCM PAC, drug users in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, as well as stakeholders such as WHO all cited this problem and suggested that “non-traditional” distribution outlets, such as street-side tea shops in Hanoi or street-side cigarette sellers in HCM City (with support from local police) as a possible solution.

INSIGHTS FROM PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS
The assessment team met with 17 drugs users – mostly IDU and primarily heroin users – affiliated with four civil society organizations, two in Hanoi and two in Ho Chi Minh City, as listed below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Service Organizations Met</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cat Trang (Hanoi)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gach dau dong (Hanoi)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuoc song moi (Ho Chi Minh)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban, Toi va Chung ta (Ho Chi Minh)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“NEEDLE ACCESS LATE AT NIGHT IS A SERIOUS ACCESS ISSUE.” -Hanoi Drug User

Pharmacies close around 9-10pm
Drug users complain about late night needle access
Buying early is not practical for some drug users, who fear being caught with needles.
HCM PAC & PWID both suggested needle distribution at roadside cigarette sellers.
Hanoi PAC & drug users suggested the same at roadside tea shops.
HANOI FOCUS GROUPS WITH PWID

The Hanoi drug users we met told a very similar story about syringes commonly used. All the PWID we spoke with exclusively used HDS syringes, and most had never heard of the “red tipped” BBVN LDS. None knew where to go to get a LDS syringe. Most of the drug users had never heard that the syringes they are using pose potentially more risk of transmitting HIV compared to the LDS syringes. Two or three of the 17 people we met, who were experienced outreach workers and had been exposed to recent training, had heard about the HDS versus LDS syringe issue. However, none of the CSOs we visited were promoting or distributing LDS syringes. The syringes given for free by the CSOs were received directly from the government, and all of those syringes were HDS.

When we explained that the LDS syringe, not available in Hanoi, had a lower risk of HIV transmission, the Hanoi drug users asked why they had not been offered an opportunity to try the product. They expressed a strong interest in learning more about and trying LDS.

NEEDLE QUALITY

“The free needles are often dull, hard to use, and leave scars. See mine here.”
- Hanoi drug user

Most of the drug users reported a preference for LDS because they were more consistently sharp and because the plunger did not leak drugs. They reported that the donor-funded free syringes sometimes had dull needles and leaked drugs. The HCM drug users did not cite health benefits of the LDS over the HDS unprompted. As with the Hanoi group, the more experienced drug users seemed to know that syringes with less dead space would logically carry less risk for transmitting HIV. But their preference for the BBVN LDS was clearly based on satisfaction with the product characteristics, namely the sharp needle and well-fitting plunger.

NEEDLE MANUFACTURERS, WHOLESALERS AND DISTRIBUTORS

We met with the following syringe and needle manufacturers, wholesalers, and distributors in Vietnam.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company Name</th>
<th>Company Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Xuan Hoa</td>
<td>Medical Product Distribution</td>
<td>Large medical/pharmaceutical product distribution company serving Hanoi and some northern provinces in Vietnam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Company based in Hanoi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rang Dong</td>
<td>Medical Product Distribution</td>
<td>Large medical product distributor in HCM City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Company based in Ho Chi Minh</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>City</td>
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<tr>
<td>BBVN</td>
<td>Medical Product Manufacturer</td>
<td>Large scale medical product manufacturer and supply company</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&amp; Wholesaler</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ngoc Khanh Medical</td>
<td>Medical Product Wholesale</td>
<td>Wholesale market with wide range of medical and pharmaceutical products for all northern provinces in Vietnam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wholesale Market in</td>
<td>Wholesale Market in Hanoi</td>
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**BBVN HQ IN HANOI**

**BBVN**

The assessment team met BBVN representatives in their Hanoi office. BBVN is well aware that their “red tipped” LDS syringe sells at much higher volumes in the south, with very low sales in the north. BBVN estimates that syringes generate approximately 20% of BBVN’s business in the north of Vietnam but as much as 30% in the south. Monthly sales of LDS syringes in the north are quite low, ranging from about 30,000 to 40,000 units per month, but significantly higher in the south. In Hanoi and the north of the country, BBVN sells syringes to the medical wholesale market as well as to approximately 40 hospitals at a wholesale price of 2,000 VND. When asked about low sales in the north, the BBVN representative explained that pharmacies and wholesalers in the north are simply not ordering BBVN’s LDS syringe, so they do not supply it. The BBVN representative explained that they do not have a field-based sales force. Limited sales and marketing professionals focus on office-based contract negotiations and telephone-based sales.

**BBVN HQ IN HANOI**

**BBVN**

Unrealized sales potential in the north

Ms. Vu - Business Development Supervisor

Southern sales of Low Dead Space is high (probably in the millions)

Needles make up only about 10% of our business in the north (30% in the south)

Northern sales of LDS only 30-40,000/month

We sell to the medical wholesale market and up to 40 hospitals - 2,000 Dong is price to wholesale

BBVN has marketing or sales promotion for needles in the trade

Not aware of the scientific evidence that LDS spread HIV less

Willing to cooperate to boost distribution of LDS

“We’re proud that our needle conforms to higher European standards, compared to the local product.”

The BBVN representative interviewed was not specifically familiar with the scientific evidence indicating the reduced HIV transmission risk associated with LDS syringes compared to HDS syringes. BBVN is very proud to be supplying to the Vietnam market a high quality syringe manufactured according to European standards, but the company was not making any attempt to promote the health benefits of using LDS syringes to wholesale or retail outlets carrying their LDS products. The BBVN representative was open to the possibility of working with PSI and other stakeholders to build a wider supply of LDS syringes to the trade in the north of Vietnam.

**HCM NEEDLE DISTRIBUTOR**

Sells both HDS and LDS

**RANG DONG COMPANY - SYRINGE DISTRIBUTOR IN THE SOUTH**

The assessment team visited a medical distributor in Ho Chi Minh City, who is one of the main syringe distributors in the south. This distributor mainly distributes HDS syringes, and is well aware of the large market for BBVN LDS syringes in the south of Vietnam. In an attempt capture some of the LDS market, he has made a connection with a Chinese company in Malaysia producing a low-priced LDS product currently sold in California, under the brand name “Airlife”. The Airlife syringes are not currently widely available in Vietnam. The company hopes to begin importing them in larger quantities and selling
them at a price lower than the BBVN Omnican to capture some of BBVN’s market share for LDS syringes.

The Chinese company Tiankang Medical Products in Anhui is producing a syringe with a plunger that extends into the dead space (sometimes called a “displacement spike”). Some syringe experts believe that syringes with a “displacement spike” may have a lower risk than HDS syringes, but are likely still not as safe as LDS syringes. The extent to which this kind of syringe reduces HIV risk has not yet been tested.

UNDERCUTTING THE BBVN LDS SYRINGE?
Promoting a Malaysian-made LDS syringe, brand name “Airlife”

THE BROKEN SUPPLY CHAIN
Why are LDS needles not widely sold in Hanoi?

The Xuan Hoa representative had never heard that the HDS syringes they are selling into the market had a higher risk of HIV transmission than the LDS syringes. “Even the BBVN people never mentioned that to me,” she said. Once she knew about the issue of transmission risk, she was very willing to consider a partnership with government and civil society partners, in which her company would help promote distribution of LDS syringes into the wholesale and retail trade in northern Vietnam.

GOVERNMENT SUPPORT FOR LDS SOCIAL MARKETING
Senior officials at the VAAC and the Ho Chi Minh City PAC were well informed of the advantages of LDS over HDS. The VAAC reported no specific plan to increase access to LDS, but expressed support for efforts to develop the evidence base on the issue and launch quality pilot projects to begin to expand LDS use, where possible and appropriate.

The Ho Chi Minh City PAC reported that they were already in the process of planning their next syringe procurement, with the aim of including LDS syringes in the procurement. The PAC had never done such procurement and requested assistance from PSI/Vietnam to develop proper technical specifications to use in the procurement process to ensure they received a high-quality product acceptable to drug users.
RECOMMENDATIONS

HO CHI MINH PAC
Procuring LDS for the 1st time

Planning to procure LDS in 2012
But requesting assistance to develop technical specifications to ensure quality of the LDS product procured

Several organizations in Vietnam are considering how to integrate LDS syringes into HIV prevention efforts in the country. The government and select donor agencies are moving forward with LDS syringe procurements; international and Vietnamese NGOs and community service organizations are considering how to improve access to and informed demand for LDS syringes among drug users; private sector syringe manufacturers, distributors, and retailers in Vietnam are beginning to learn about the issue, and some fledgling efforts have already begun to develop and import more LDS syringes; and Vietnamese PWID are learning more about the issue, equipping themselves with knowledge so they can obtain high quality products that will enable them to protect their health. The following recommendations are intended to inform a range of efforts to integrate LDS into respective IUD programming in the near future.

1. Ensure That Activities to Distribute and Promote LDS Syringes are Informed by Evidence

Decisions regarding how to manufacture, distribute or promote LDS syringes should be informed by evidence. Currently, there is a dearth of information and data on the topic of LDS syringes. We hope this rapid assessment helps to fill that gap. However, more data and information is needed to inform decisions at each level as we move forward. In particular, there is an urgent need for consumer research to help us better understand motivators and barriers to using particular syringe types. Consumer research should be conducted to better understand why some PWID use high versus LDS syringes. Studies should investigate what, if any, product-related barriers exist to discourage drug users from using existing LDS syringes already in country. The emerging scientific evidence indicating that HDS syringes have a higher likelihood of transmitting HIV is compelling, so high quality studies generating practical data with potential to further inform programming should be conducted. Rapid methodologies should be used to avoid unnecessary delays in improving access to LDS.

2. Procure High Quality LDS Syringes

To date, government and donors supporting IDU programming in Vietnam have procured HDS syringes for free distribution. Select agencies (i.e. the HCM City PAC with support from WB and WHO) are beginning to move forward with LDS procurement. Procurement of LDS syringes should also be informed by evidence, including consumer research suggested above, to ensure LDS products procured meet the needs and preferences of the people who inject drugs. If the consumer research or experience on the ground calls for it, there may be a need to modify existing LDS syringes to make them more attractive or appropriate for people who inject drugs. Procurement agents should make sure to avoid suppliers who cannot meet quality standards. Syringe manufacturers in Asia are already attempting to produce syringes with no or less dead space, but the quality of these products is uncertain.

3. Distribute and Promote Acceptable LDS to PWID to Expand Choice

Evidence should be used to inform pilot efforts to give people who inject drugs the opportunity to increase use of LDS. Pilot projects should include a monitoring/evaluation component to assess the effectiveness of pilot efforts, and to identify challenges and potential solutions. Programs should ensure that drug users have the opportunity, ability and motivation to use LDS syringes if they choose, but should also ensure that a wide range of sterile injecting equipment options are available to meet the varied needs of people who inject drugs—as injecting equipment needs vary depending on a range of factors.

4. Produce Evidence-based BCC Tools to Build Consumer Demand for LDS Syringes

Organizations with capacity on behavior change communications should produce evidence-based BCC materials and educational sessions that will support drug users to make their own choices on what products to use to protect their own health. LDS promotion should be accurate, including both the possible benefits and drawbacks of both LDS and HDS syringe products.
5. **Leverage Multiple Commercial Distribution Channels to Expand Access to LDS in the North as well as the South**

Private sector companies currently supplying the retail trade with syringes should be supported to ensure their sales and distribution activities provide LDS syringes to pharmacies and other outlets where drug users commonly go to obtain syringes. To expand access to LDS syringes in the short term, projects should consider partnering with BBVN, currently the main supplier of LDS syringes to Vietnam, to ensure existing LDS syringes are available at pharmacies throughout Vietnam wherever there are people who inject drugs. Based on the findings from this assessment, LDS syringe availability appears high in the south and very low in the north, so these activities will likely focus on improving LDS syringe availability in the northern provinces. Over the medium and long term, other syringe manufacturers may enter the market to help fill the demand.

To ensure access to LDS syringes after pharmacies have closed, projects with capacity to cover non-traditional outlets (e.g. tea stalls, cigarette stands, etc.) should work to integrate LDS syringes into these outlets. Police support should be secured to minimize the risk of interference.

6. **Use Trade Marketing Techniques to Encourage Commercial Wholesalers and Retailers to Sell, Promote and Display LDS**

In addition to informing PWID about the benefits of LDS syringes to promote consumer demand, organizations that have direct contact with the Vietnamese wholesale and retail traders should encourage those wholesalers and retailers to order LDS syringes and carry them in their stock. Improving product availability in the trade will help to encourage consumer demand.

Pharmacies in the north, or any other areas where LDS syringes are not yet widely available, should receive prioritized programmatic support. To stimulate interest in LDS, it may be useful to offer small amounts of LDS syringes for free or for consignment sales to reduce the risk to retailers, who may be nervous to pay up front for an unknown product. Once initial free samples run out, pharmacies should be encouraged to resupply by contacting the nearest LDS distributor or wholesaler.

7. **Reduce Price of LDS Syringes**

LDS syringes are approximately twice as expensive as HDS syringes on the Vietnamese private sector market, with the BBVN Omnican selling for about 2000-3000 VND and the Vinahankook for about 1000-1500 VND. Most of the drug users we spoke with reported that 2000-3000 VND was an acceptable price for a quality syringe. However, several pharmacies visited during the assessment reported increasing the price for people they thought were drug users. Ensuring a fair retail price for LDS syringes will be an important part of any program. Projects should consider setting up simple monitoring systems to track LDS syringe prices at the retail level, using incentives to reward retailers who sell to PWID at the recommended price. While demand for LDS syringes rises, projects should work with LDS manufacturers, distributors and wholesalers to negotiate reductions in wholesale prices — which should, in turn, result in lower retail prices.

8. **Inform Discussions Regarding the Total Market for N/S to Reduce Donor Subsidy Required to Sustain Access to Safer Injecting Equipment**

Projects distributing or selling LDS syringes should share distribution data with the relevant government authorities, in order to build a clearer picture of the total market for syringes in Vietnam. Monitoring the total N/S market (including free distribution) will be critical to informing efforts to shift PWID to purchase their own supply of LDS syringes and will help ensure that PWID have reliable access to LDS syringes if/when donor funding ends.

9. **M&E to Determine Effectiveness, Efficiency and Sustainability**

Projects suggested above should include sufficient M&E systems that produce data to show the extent to which efforts to increase convenient access to and consistent use of LDS are effective, cost-efficient and sustainable. Results and lessons learned should be shared widely with all stakeholders to inform improvements and eventual scale up.