**Injecting rooms are the way to go**

**STEVE PRICE**

**HERALD SUN**

**MAY 19, 2011**

**VICTORIA'S current road toll stands at 119.**

The figures represent the dreadful waste of life caused by road accidents, stark figures that don't tell the stories of people young and old needlessly cut down in accidents.

The toll doesn't reflect the cause of the deaths. It's just a bold, depressing number. And despite millions of dollars and dozens of advertising campaigns, people continue to die.

At the height of Melbourne's heroin overdose epidemic - which lasted more than three years - this newspaper also recorded the daily heroin deaths.

In 1999 both figures went well past 300, with 376 people killed on the roads and 324 at the end of a heroin needle. The following year's toll wasn't much better and then the heroin drought hit.

At the height of that war against heroin, Melbourne's ambulance paramedics spent as much time injecting unconscious addicts with Narcan, a life-saving drug, as they did bringing people back from near-fatal heart attacks.

Standing in a Flemington kitchen with one of those paramedics back in 2000, I was staggered as a young mother came out of her near-fatal heroin shot - only to verbally abuse the man trying to save her.

I shouldn't have been there, but the medical saviours were so sick and tired of spending their days rescuing addicts that they let me in. The small apartment was home to a couple of toddlers and the woman's husband.

He was the one who called the ambulance and he copped even more abuse from his wife than they did. Her concern was that an expensive shot of her drug of choice had been wasted because Narcan cancels the heroin high.

The next day I watched an undercover police operation in Footscray as Vietnamese dealers traded the white powder outside a butcher shop.

The butcher had complained to me on radio about being sick and tired of having to chase junkies away.

Now it seems we are headed back to those bad old days. The overdose figures are harder to come by and don't approach those at the turn of the decade and the new marketplace is Richmond, but the problem is as hot as ever, as is the ensuing debate.

In NSW a Labor government took a gamble and installed a medical injecting room in Kings Cross. This marked its 10th anniversary this month.

Up until now it's been on trial and now Yarra Council - which covers Richmond - wants a trial. Police Minister Peter Ryan has already ruled it out without even conferring with his Premier, Ted Baillieu, or any of his colleagues.

As I have repeated consistently whenever this divisive and emotional issue is raised: What have we got to lose? Why accept even one unnecessary drug death, let alone hundreds of them?

Addicts need all the help they can get, be it medical-related, rehabilitation or counselling.

Letting one young girl or boy die from a too-strong dose of heroin at the end of a dark and lonely laneway behind some rubbish bins is barbaric.

Opening a shopfront that acts as a rehab counselling centre and a medically safe place for people weakened by addiction to take their drugs is a small price to pay.

We allow needle exchanges and prescribed methadone treatment, so why not do that little bit more to save lives?