Prisons and Criminal Justice

What?

At any one time around 85,000 people are held in one over 140 prisons in England and Wales. A high proportion of prisoners come from socially excluded sections of our communities and surveys show that around 90% of those entering prison have some form of mental health or substance misuse problem.

The criminal justice system as a whole offers important opportunities for improving health and tackling inequalities. For it to be effective and enduring however, work in prisons is best carried out using a whole prison approach.

This involves all aspects of prison which touch on the wider determinants of health (such as education and life skills), plus health promotion, health education, patient education and prevention. Furthermore, the whole prison approach is concerned to address the health and well-being of staff, visitors, families and the local community. However, the approach also looks at the whole offender pathway, working with probation services, reducing reoffending partnerships and resettlement teams.
The vision of the Government report Health promoting prisons: A shared approach (DH 2002) is a balanced one, recognising that prisons should be safe, secure, reforming and health promoting, and is grounded in the concept of decency (covering such principles as fairness and the ‘human rights agenda’).

Why?

The Government’s emphasis on tackling inequalities and addressing social inclusion makes the criminal justice system an important setting for promoting health. As highlighted in chapter 6 (paras 34-36) of Choosing Health: Making Healthy Choices Easier, prisons in particular offer unique opportunities to target a difficult-to-reach population – providing an environment of relative stability and regular contact with health services.

How?

Healthy prisons and probation services should focus on:

- policies which promote health
- an environment which is actively supportive of health
- prevention, health education and other health promotion initiatives.

Within England and Wales, the Prison Service Order for Health Promotion PSO 3200 is one vehicle within the prison to begin to drive a coordinated and measurable response to health improvement. This advises on how to put into practice the guidance document Health Promoting Prisons: A Shared Approach and focuses on five key topic areas:

- Mental health promotion and well-being
- Smoking
- Healthy eating and nutrition
- Healthy lifestyles including sex and relationships and active living
- Drug and other substance misuse.

At a European level, the World Health Organisation has established a Health in Prisons Programme

Further Information

The Department of Health recognises that high quality health care for prisoners has an important contribution to make in tackling mental illness, reducing health inequalities and cutting the chances of re-offending. It is important therefore, both for the prisoners and for the public health of the wider population that time spent in custody is used positively to prevent disease and promote health. Indeed, prisoners are a transient population, most spending only a short period of time in custody before returning to the wider community taking with them their health and social problems.

Historically, prison health care has been organised outside the NHS. The approach since 2006 is one of partnership between the NHS and local prisons, with prison health being commissioned by the local PCT. The aim is to provide health care for prisoner’s based on
need and at least equivalent to that offered to people in the wider community. However, the agenda is ambitious and the challenge is to deliver high quality treatment and care within a custodial setting whilst being able to maintain the ability to balance security, control and justice. The prison health agenda is a complex and challenging task that offers prison healthcare and the NHS opportunities for new and closer partnership working within a new and dynamic environment.

Links

Health in Prisons Project (WHO Regional Office for Europe)

Ministry of Justice – health and Justice

WHO Collaborating Centre for Promoting Health and Prisons

WHO Healthy Settings Portal – Prisons

Resources

Health in Prisons (WHO Regional Office for Europe)

Health Promoting Prisons: A Shared Approach (Department of Health report, 2002)

Mental Health Promotion in Prisons (Consensus Statement of the WHO Regional Office for Europe Health in Prisons Project, 1998)

Prison Service Order 3200 for Health Promotion

Reducing Re-offending By Ex-Prisoners (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002)


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