

# Personality disordered offenders: the therapeutic community approach at HMYOI Aylesbury

The term therapeutic community has been used to describe a variety of institutions. Although they may vary in their day to day workings, in general they follow a common ethos. Therapeutic communities endeavour to create an atmosphere of trust and responsibility within a communal environment. Other common principles are; the use of a constructive programme, an active involvement by residents in community decisions / running of the unit (to varying degrees), group work and a recognition that residents have a role in facilitating their own therapy.

Structured activity and the approach of therapeutic communities have been highlighted concerning the management of personality disordered individuals. Within the Prison Service HMP Grendon Underwood comprises a number of wings which operate as therapeutic communities. At present, there are also smaller therapeutic communities at HMP Gartree and HMP Wormwood Scrubs. Within the Young Offender estate, HMYOI Portland runs a concept based therapeutic community and HMYOI Aylesbury's therapeutic community (The Chiltern Unit), was opened in 1997.

The Chiltern Unit is a democratic therapeutic community. It is based on the principles of democratisation, permissiveness, communalism and reality confrontation. (A Maxwell Jones type TC). It is a residential unit which recently expanded from 9 places to 18.

The aims of treatment are:

- to improve social and coping skills;
- addressing offending behaviour;
- to create and sustain a safe regime for residents and staff;
- to encourage positive social behaviour & discourage negative and disruptive

- behaviour;
- address negative self image and encourage a sense of self worth.

Staff on the unit are discipline officers and psychologists who have been locally trained by an outside consultant. The weekly programme includes three therapy groups, two wing meetings, one session of compulsory PE and three compulsory sessions of education. Courses such as anger management are also run on the unit. The members of the Chiltern Unit are young offenders serving sentences of over three years up to and including life. The minimum stay on the unit is 12/13 months and the maximum length of stay is 18 months.

The criteria for acceptance is:

- motivated to participate in therapy.
- aged between 17 and 21;
- minimum of 12 months left to serve or to Parole Eligibility Date;
- not undergoing psychiatric treatment or taking psychotropic drugs;
- sufficiently stable to be able to cope with intensive group

therapy.

Assessments take place after one month on the unit and are then carried out on a quarterly basis. Targets are identified concerning areas to be addressed and these provide structure for residents. Certificates are awarded after the first month and at six and twelve months, in order to encourage members and reinforce progress. A family day is held annually and is organised by the community members.

The question is often asked whether young offenders are mature enough to cope with therapy. The answer is simple; some are and some are not. This is an area which is explored carefully during assessment and selection procedures.

Like most therapeutic communities in custodial settings, the Chiltern Unit functions within the confines of the prison regime. Therefore, it inevitably faces problems such as disruptions to groups and the threat of non TC 'lodgers' on the wing. In addition, a lack of knowledge of therapeutic communities on the part of staff and prisoners within the

establishment has not enhanced the image of The Chiltern Unit. However, these are problems which are faced as a community and may be addressed. Currently, residents and staff are in the midst of planning to heighten awareness of the unit and promote the work they are undertaking. Consequently, it is understandable that therapeutic communities, for a number of reasons, are rare within prisons, and some have also been short lived. However, the future of therapeutic communities does look promising. There is currently a movement towards the accreditation of existing units. HMP Grendon Underwood now have one accredited wing which is taken into account regarding key performance indicators for offending behaviour.

Other recent developments are the appointment of a policy co-ordinator at Prison Service Head Quarters and the provision of a 200 place unit in a private sector prison. In addition, with the Government's emphasis on the management of personality disordered individuals, there is a strong indication that support for therapeutic communities is on the increase.

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