

DEATHS IN CUSTODY

CARING FOR THOSE AT RISK

CONFERENCE - ISTD CAMBRIDGE 5-7 APRIL 1994

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After one of the most blustery Easter weekends on record, over 170 delegates arrived at New Hall, Cambridge for an international conference entitled 'Deaths in Custody: Caring for People at Risk'. The conference was organised by the unique 'Institute for the Study and Treatment of Delinquency', ISTD for short; an organisation which every member of the Prison Service (in my opinion) should seriously think about joining.

The conference was expertly chaired from beginning to end by Ian Dunbar, Director of the (former) Directorate of Inmate Administration; the event coincided with his retirement from the Prison Service, thus offering us his final official public appearance. In the introduction he was able to welcome a genuinely international audience with delegates from Greece, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Netherlands, China, Australia, Ukraine, Bophuthatswana, Albania, USA, in addition to the rest of the UK. The conference was significantly oversubscribed: a measure of the perceived importance of the topic. Happily, the Prison Service was well represented with a wide mixture of staff of all grades and a small, but significant, number of prisoners who had a valuable contribution to make.

The subject matter covered the full range of custodial settings and although there was a tendency to focus on penal institutions and suicide, non-self-inflicted deaths were not overlooked.

In reviewing such an event it is possible only to give a flavour of the ingredients.

Professor Rod Morgan, not renowned for his reticence, set us off on the right track with a world-wide overview of the range of deaths in detention under the heading: 'In

the Hands of the State: Care and Accountability'. He categorised five causes of deaths: authorised execution, unauthorised execution with state acquiescence, death through inter-co-detainee violence, suicide and death by 'natural' causes. The five categories are overlapping; in suicide, for example, factors from each of the other four may have a contributory role. He reminded us of the sinister use of 'disappearances' in some countries as a method of control and recommended that the concept of custody might best be viewed as a state or condition rather than a location.

In 'Suicides and Institutions' Professor Gethin Morgan challenged the medical view that suicide was too rare an event to warrant the general practitioner's concern, by contrasting with the amount of attention devoted to illnesses and diseases which are statistically much rarer. In the management of 'at risk' people the key danger points follow a similar pattern, regardless of type of institution: entry/reception, discharge, times of staff changeover, etc.

In 'Prison Suicides: Research, Policy and Practice: What Progress?' Alison Liebling of Cambridge achieved the near impossible by successfully summarising in the space of 45 minutes her lengthy and comprehensive self-harm/suicide prison research. This challenging research highlights the inadequacies of basing perceptions of the issues in self-harm and suicide on standard statistical information and analyses. Possibly the most significant aspect of this research is the discrediting of the medical or psychiatric explanation as the most salient background to self-harm, through the uncovering of a larger (and often overlooked) category of prisoner who can best be described as a poor copier. Of those prisoners interviewed who

had not attempted suicide, around 18 per cent had contemplated but had successfully overcome suicidal ideation. It was encouraging to learn that small, but very significant, practical changes had seen them through, for example, finding employment, talking about their problems, making friends and so on.

David Neal, founder of the Suicide Awareness Support Unit, continued this joint presentation with an overview of how the Prison Service has developed its suicide and self-harm strategy over the last three years. The strategy is well documented elsewhere, as is Alison's research; it represents, however, an excellent example of policy being developed on the basis of informed research (sadly, a seemingly rare event). The key features of the strategy are a shift of focus away from a medical perspective towards a shared teamwork responsibility for the care of the suicidal. In pointing us to the future, David highlighted five challenges: maintaining a concept of individual care against a growing custodial population, management support for a multi-disciplinary approach, sustaining staff training, continuing to tackle attitudes to interpretation of self-harm and maintaining the impetus of a new, fresh approach.¹

The central day of the conference was begun by Sir Louis Blom Cooper talking on 'Unnatural Deaths and Forensic Psychiatry'. Death, we were reminded, is both irreversible and irrecusable. A main focus of this presentation was issues relating to the role of the coroner and the process of investigation/enquiry surrounding a death in custody. According to Sir Louis, the coroner system, whilst needing reform, is essentially unreformable at present. He presented a powerful argument for the setting up of an enquiry/investigative process which was quite separate to and distinct from the coroner's investigation which currently has a very restricted brief/term of reference.

One of our Australian visitors, David McDonald from the Australian Institute of Criminology gave a presentation entitled: 'Australian Deaths in Custody: The Impact of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody'. This, the most expensive Royal Commission of its kind in Australian history, investigated 99 deaths in

custody since the death of John Pat, a 17 year old aboriginal who died in custody in 1983. Although representing one per cent of the population, aboriginals account for 14 per cent of the prison population and 29 per cent of police detentions. The commission chose to undertake a wide-ranging investigation examining legal, social and cultural factors rather than restricting itself solely to the pathology of individual cases. The governmental response to the Commission is a commitment to a philosophy of empowerment and self development on the part of the aboriginal community. Whilst this response has failed to satisfy the aboriginal community's desire for justice to be seen to be brought against custodial officers involved in the actual cases detailed, it represents a significant cultural shift in governmental attitudes with likely far-reaching consequences. David stressed the importance of defining and developing the concept of the duty to care in the widest possible sense, so that it would underpin the work of all custodial staff whether that be at the point of arrest using a weapon or within the context of secure detention.

During the major part of this central day, delegates had many parallel options from which to choose. I went to the 'Eastern European experience' where we listened to developments in penal services in Slovakia (Dr Robert Fiko) and Poland (Dr Danuta Gadus). It is always difficult to gain more than the sketchiest feel for quite different cultures in this type of context, but the main differences there, from the perspective of care for those at risk in custody, seemed to be an emphasis on specialist intervention arising from an essentially medical approach to the problem. In Poland there is a particular desire to attempt to import best practice from the UK experience.²

A 'Women at Risk' symposium was run by Michael Jennings and Wendy Ratcliffe from Styal prison in which we examined the particular problems encountered by female prisoners in the context of pathways to suicide and self-harm. The over-riding conclusion appeared to be that gender differences related to differences in emphasis or degree rather than anything which might be defined as distinctly different at a qualitative level. The

1 Alison quite correctly took the Prison Service to task for the continued use of the demeaning and derogatory usage of the term 'body' in reference to prisoners).

2 Although the discussion involved a series of anecdotes about some appalling conditions in Eastern European jails, I heard nothing which sounded any worse than anecdotes from the worst of the Western state and county jails.

success of the Styal prisoner befriending (or EARS scheme as it is known locally) was described; preliminary analyses of self-harm indicates that the listening scheme is having a beneficial effect.

For my final symposium of the day I attended an HMP Wandsworth presentation describing their experience to date of putting the new Prison Service strategy into practice. This was a joint presentation by governor, prison officer, prisoners, probation officer and a Samaritan. Roger Haley of Wandsworth skilfully led the presentation through an open, honest and constructively critical appraisal, warts and all. Again, prisoner listening schemes received much praise (from the listeners themselves) and demonstrated another vein of talent and rich resources which, if handled carefully, is there to be tapped.

There were a dozen other seminars to choose from, including police, special hospitals, Regional Secure Units, Immigration Detainees, the Australian and Northern Ireland experiences.

We were delighted to have Terry Waite as our guest after dinner speaker who gave us a moving, personal account of his experiences against the background of distortions and rationalisations which have appeared in the media and press since his release from captivity.

The final day consisted of presentations by Lindsay Hayes and Joseph Rowan describing developments in suicide prevention and care for the suicidal in prisons in the USA. Conference fatigue had caught up with me by this point and I was unable to take adequate notes of the vast

range of statistics that were presented. With such a diverse and varied prison system there were accounts of many ad hoc approaches to intervention and developments of good practice but a relative absence of systemic interventions. For me the most encouraging accounts related to those jails where the inmate population had risen dramatically but directors had instituted suicide prevention/awareness policies which had equally dramatically reduced the level of suicides. Key amongst the critical factors were adequate staff training and increasing the percentage of female staff. The message came across strongly that attitudes and motivation were more important than resources alone.

The conference concluded with an open plenary forum which gave an opportunity for any neglected or overlooked topics to be aired. It was clear from the discussion that the conference could be pronounced a success.

From a Prison Service perspective it was reassuring to see that we are now in a position to be able to report positively on developments and approaches in the whole area of Deaths in Custody, to such an extent that we are way ahead of other organisations. There is, however, much that we need to continue to do; this is an area where there is no room for complacency, a fact about which the pressure groups in attendance at Cambridge continue to remind us.

Proceedings of the conference are to be published; promised within six months by Whiting and Birch who published the write-up of the first ISTD conference on this subject in 1991 ■

VERBALS

"The elderly were infrequent victims of violence, though 10% of muggings involved those aged 60 or over. Women were considerably less at risk than men of all types of violence except domestic assaults and muggings. Slightly less than 1% of women overall reported at least one incident of domestic assault in the survey."

[British Crime Survey published in Criminal Justice Digest No 75
HMSO]