CLASSIC TEXT REVISITED:  
**Medical Power in Prisons**

David Scott reviews *Medical Power in Prisons* and explains why its insights are as relevant today as they were when it was first published in 1990.

Joe Sim’s *Medical Power in Prisons: The Prison Medical Service in England 1774–1989* (1990, Milton Keynes: Open University Press), the first sociological study of its kind, is widely recognised as one of the most important histories of the prison ever written. Starting with an account of the passing of the 1774 Health of Prisons Act the book charts the growth and development of the Prison Medical Service (PMS) from its origins until the late 1980s. The key theme in this book, whether prisons are healthy places that can lead to sustained human growth or are inherently negative places rooted in alienation, regulation, and control, remains central to contemporary debates. *Medical Power in Prisons* also contributed to a growing body of evidence in the 1980s that the PMS was a blot on the penal landscape. Indeed, the PMS was gradually dismantled after the book’s publication following a protracted though eventually successful struggle to end the isolation of prison medicine through the introduction of the NHS into the prison place.

*Medical Power in Prisons* is a remarkable scholarly achievement for a number of reasons, including (1) its enduring critical theoretical insights; (2) its questioning of medical benevolence, expertise, and scientific legitimation; and (3) its historical context to contemporary controversial issues in prisons.

*Medical Power in Prison* adopted the method of the ‘history from below’ drawing upon the insights of Michel Foucault and humanist Marxism. Though Sim utilised Foucault to analyse penal power, normalisation, and the central role of prisoner resistance, his analysis was fused with Marxist concerns around class struggle, hegemony, less eligibility, and the central role of the capitalist state in shaping penal order, allowing him to explain the continued reliance upon physical violence in regimes focused upon ‘transforming the soul’. In short, Sim moved away from a purely structural account of penal power to one able to conceptualise agency and lived experience, in so doing embellishing upon some of the most significant achievements of critical criminology, most notably those derived from the work of Stuart Hall. Sim also focused upon the experience of black prisoners and, through the use of women prisoner autobiographies, located women at the centre of the medical gaze, transcending the masculinist assumptions of many of the previous histories of the prison.

Another of the book’s central achievements is its scrupulously detailed evidence of how medical knowledge has largely been subsumed beneath the priorities of order, security, discipline, and classification. Harrowing testimonies, such as Harry Howard’s recount of his own lobotomy, through to detailed exposures of how drugs such as chlorpromazine were deployed to provide a ‘liquid cosh’ for recalcitrant prisoners, permeate the text. Sim also provides shocking revelations about the medical legitimation of inadequate diets; the high number of deaths at prisons such as Coldbath Fields (where 376 prisoners died between 1795 and 1829); and the consequences of harsh regimes rooted in the principles of less eligibility, such as the tragic death of 15-year-old Edward Andrews at Birmingham Prison in 1854.

The controversial issues highlighted in this penal history from below continue to plague the prison estate today. Calls for equivalence in health care face the obstacles of less eligibility and the needs of people neglected by welfare agencies on the outside, whilst the current ascendency of psycho-medical power, epitomised in the influence of psychologists in daily penal practices and the development of the ‘health promoting prisons’ agenda in penal policy, sadly demonstrate that the insights from this book remain as relevant today as they did on publication.
Following the Centre's publication of Professor David Nutt's July 2009 Eve Saville lecture, *Estimating Drug Harms: A Risky Business?*, the Home Secretary, Alan Johnson, welcomed the publication saying:

*It should be self-evident that decisions on Government policy ought to be informed by sound evidence ... science research ought to be contributing a major part of that evidence base. It should be playing a key role in helping us to decide our overall strategies.*

Sorry, that was David Blunkett in 2000, speaking to a gathering of academics. In the real world Professor Nutt lost his unpaid post, five members of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs resigned, and a widespread debate took place in the media about why one of the country's most respected scientists was sacked as chair of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs when the speech had been previously cleared by the Home Office and was given by David Nutt speaking in his capacity as a Professor at Imperial College London. The Centre held a public meeting attended by 400 people where Professor Nutt explained events from his perspective. This video can be found on the Centre's website as can *Estimating Drug Harms: A Risky Business?*

Regular readers of *cjm* will now be used to the government taking against an evidence base that does not concur with current criminal justice policy. Given similar treatment to Professor Nutt were the academics at the LSE who were given a hard time by the government because of the problems they had identified with the national ID card scheme. In a number of the Centres' publications Professors Rod Morgan, Tim Hope, Reece Walters, Ed Cape, and Lee Bridges have also pointed to serious problems with the uses of research by government.

There were two concrete results of the Nutt affair. First, on 15 December as part of a government review ordered to take the steam out of the issue, Lord Drayson, who had 'been abroad' when the key events occurred, published a consultation on principles on scientific advice to government which met with a lukewarm reception.

Second, on 15 January 2010, Professor Nutt, with the help of the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, established the Independent Scientific Committee on Drugs (ISCD). The Committee, which is filled to the brim with scientific experts of all types that any government would be delighted to have in the fold, will hold its first meeting in late April and get on with the job.

It is important to note, despite some media reporting, the ISCD does not see itself as ‘a rival’ to the ACMD. The ISCD is a body focused on the science and will deliver clear independent information about the science into the public arena. Les Iverson, the interim chair of the ACMD was quoted in the Daily Telegraph describing his role and the ACMD in the following way: ‘I'm not the drug adviser to the government, I'm a spokesman for a large group of people on the advisory council, only a few of whom are scientists.’ (Daily Telegraph, 13 January 2010) The distinction is clear enough. Having a body dedicated to the research and not inhibited by government qualms in reporting findings that are in the public interest will be seen by many as a significant step forward.

Whatever the composition of the next government, one can only hope that when a Minister of State argues that ‘Government policy ought to be informed by sound evidence’ they really mean it.

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**Risky people or risky societies?**

The Centre for Crime and Justice Studies has published a three part series exploring policy challenges affecting young adults in trouble with the law. The first, written by the Centre's director, Richard Garside, critiques the government's reliance on identifying 'risky' individuals for targeted interventions. The second, by Dr James McGuire of the University of Liverpool, challenges the view that coercive interventions can be effective. The third paper, also authored by Garside, will be on social justice approaches. The series forms part of the Centre's contribution to the Transition to Adulthood Alliance, established by the Barrow Cadbury Trust. Visit www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/publications.html for more information.
It's murder out there!

In thinking about violence, the tendency is often to focus on one-on-one violent acts. At a more structural level, ‘social murder’ has been used to describe the harms which bring about mass injury and death as a consequence of economic arrangements. Dr David Roberts’ briefing ‘Social murder is an interesting concept, describing the social harms which occur at a global, national and local level, bringing about mass injury and death which extends beyond the traditional picture of one person hitting another person. This project will aim to look at the nature and scale of ‘social murder’ – primarily casting its gaze beyond the ‘one on one’ model of violence. Dr David Stuckler and colleagues have examined the public health effect of economic crises in research commissioned by the Centre and published in the Lancet. For information, see here www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/publichealthrecession.html. Dr David Roberts in his briefing, ‘Social harm and crime at a global level’ argues that while much of international relations policy focuses on terrorism and civil war, the real threats to human security lie elsewhere, like that lack of clean water.

You say what?

Owen Coyle, manager of Burnley Football Club, leads the way on crime reduction strategies… ‘We represent the whole town. We don’t take that lightly. Last year, crime rates are less when we win and more people go to work on a Monday’.

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This section is compiled from information featured in our monthly bulletin compiled by Anna Gilmour. To get regular news and snippets from the Centre, register for our ebulletin here www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/signup.html.

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Independent Scientific Committee on Drugs
Chair: Professor David Nutt

The Independent Scientific Committee on Drugs (ISCD) was announced on 15 January 2010.

It aims to provide to the public, policy makers and educationalists the best possible scientific evidence about the effects and harms of drugs irrespective of legal status.

If you would like to join the ‘Friends of ISCD’ mailing list and to discover how you might be able to help the ISCD to thrive then please visit:

www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/iscd_launch.html

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