

No Drugs In Prison A Big Ask

David Biles, *Canberra Times* (3/9/12)

One hesitates to publicly disagree with such a distinguished scholar as Clive Williams, but his opinion piece in this journal ('How to make jail drug-free', August 29, p17) which suggested that a jail could be made drug-free by making a few simple changes to management practices is simply naive. His proposal ignores the fundamental reality of correctional management in Australia.

Of course it is technically possible for this goal to be achieved by imposing a management regime which is so strict that it would not be possible for any contraband to ever find its way inside the walls or external fence of the jail. The consequence of installing such a regime, however, could be harm that is much more serious than the harm done by the occasional drug-taking by prisoners.

The first step suggested by Williams in achieving a drug-free status would be to ban all smoking and he cites the fact that New Zealand made its prisons non-smoking environments from June 2011 because of concerns about the health effects of tobacco on inmates and prison officers. This major policy change has, he claims, led to no major incidents and in fact has created a calmer environment and fewer 'standover' incidents.

This approach has been tried in Australia, when in April 1967 a major riot occurred in the Woodford Correctional Centre, north of Brisbane, following the announcement of a new

non-smoking policy. Following that announcement 120 prisoners managed to escape from the security unit by 'melting' the lexen walls with toasters and by starting fires. These prisoners then joined hundreds of other angry low-security prisoners who were also protesting the new policy.

I happened to visit the Woodford facility a few weeks after the riot and destruction, and it was clear that the non-smoking policy had been the trigger for the negative consequences and the many hundreds of thousands of dollars required for the repairs to the facility. Predictably, the non-smoking policy was quietly forgotten when the prison was reopened for normal use some months later, and similar approaches have not been tried in Australian jails since then.

It has to be said that it is obvious that the New Zealand policy was much more carefully planned (over a 12-month period) than was the case in Queensland, and it is also true that public and political attitudes to smoking have changed significantly in the past 50 years, but the major point that must be made here is that there is a major difference between creating a smoke-free prison and one which is drug-free.

Williams is quite right to observe that the most likely avenue for drugs to enter the Canberra prison is through visitors, but he goes on to suggest that this 'avenue could be blocked by physically separating prisoners and visitors, or strip and body-cavity

searching prisoners leaving the visiting area’.

Here I have to decisively part company from Williams as I regard strip searching and the searching of body cavities as equivalent to major sexual assault, certainly a major breach of human rights.

He then describes a Japanese prison that he visited which allowed one 15-minute visit a day, one visitor per visit, with physical separation of the prisoner by a glass panel, and a prison officer with each prisoner during the visit.

I too have visited many Japanese prisons but I have never seen anything as blatantly inhumane as the scenario that he described and which he clearly sees as a model for us to follow.

It seems that Williams puts all his eggs in the supply-reduction basket without any acknowledgment of the need for demand-reduction and harm-reduction, to say nothing of his apparent belief that what may be acceptable in Japanese culture should also be acceptable in Australia.

Williams can be forgiven for not having read the lengthy report by the Australian Nation Council on Drugs which appeared just one day before his own article was published under the title ‘Supply, demand and harm reduction strategies in Australian prisons, an update’.

Even a quick reading of this report reveals the complexity of the subject and the need for very careful consideration of the adequacy of the

resources that would be required to even approach the goal of a drug-free jail.

For example, the report makes it clear that enormous numbers of professional personnel are required to provide sufficient support for offenders undergoing detoxification.

Also at a more mundane level, it must be recognised that to operate a methadone maintenance program in a prison (as is currently the case in all Australian states except Queensland) is extraordinarily labour-intensive as far as prison officers and nurses are concerned.

Similarly, the seemingly simple task of conducting urine testing for drugs in a prison, on either a random or targeted basis, is a much more complex, controversial and demanding subject than is generally recognised.

Finally, it must be said that the reason that all Australian jurisdictions make provision for contact visiting for prisoners is the belief that rehabilitation or return to a normal life after prison is more likely if family bonds are strengthened rather than weakened.

It is already the case that most Australian jurisdictions require prisoners to wear pocketless clothing for visits and to subject themselves to pat-down searching by prison officers after each visit.

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