

An exploration of the health and health care needs of female offenders

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Abstract

This study was prompted by a desire to explore in more depth the health and health care needs of current and resettling female offenders — at a time when prisoner health needs and health care requirements were to be moved from the prison service into the mainstream NHS.

The specific aims of the research were:

- To investigate and consider the health circumstances and health needs of women offenders generally and around the time of resettlement;
- To examine data related to the prevalence and incidence of mental ill health in this group, and in relation to their psychological health, the effectiveness of the community

health care provided in the West Suffolk area;

- To investigate the nature and effectiveness of community/primary health care to the needs of female offenders, and to identify examples of 'good practice';
- To explore the nature and extent of cross agency communication in respect of this population sub group.

Over the course of the research the aims had to be amended to reflect the reality of the system — for example, it was only at the end of the research period (Sept. 2002) that the government announced that it would 'at last hand over' prison healthcare to the NHS.

Findings

- Health visitors etc. appear currently little involved in the interaction of inmates and their visiting children.
- At present there is no contact between the nurses and the significant others of the inmates. This is an unusual circumstance in the wider NHS where such contact is viewed as part of the holistic package of nursing care.
- Discharge planning and the arrangement of discharge packages of health care are an expected part of the provision of nursing care. The benefits of improvement

to health care services in custody may only be short lived if not matched by improving the range, quality and access of services on discharge.

- The narrow focus and use of prison based psychology services appears an under-utilisation of a valuable health care resource, which could be used for the general psychological health needs of the general inmate population.

Recommendations

- It would be beneficial to improve access of inmates to health related practitioners available in the wider NHS eg. physiotherapists, chiropractors etc.
- The practice of nursing should include an appreciation of the social context of individual behaviour and be imaginative and pro-active in relation to possible previous abuse, violence, risk taking or self-destructive behaviours.
- There would be considerable value in developing a health record in prisons that could be used by all the agencies that an inmate may have meaningful contact with during their period of imprisonment.
- There is a need to review the current, unsatisfactory system for requesting and accessing prisoners' previous health care records.
- There is a need for co-ordination of the different roles and boundaries of all those practitioners involved in either caring for, or monitoring an inmate's health.
- For prison nursing practice to improve there is a need to strengthen the professional links and profile of such nursing so that the role and function of nurses in a secure environment is clearer, more understood and better supported by the wider nursing community.