Keeping Safe

Driving down drug deaths

Juliet Lyon CBE

Most people know that if you could sort out drugs and drink you would cut crime, improve health and certainly reduce the risk of deaths in custody. Now the Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody (IAP) and the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) are working together to contribute to a Prison Service review and wider government drug and alcohol policy.

Substance misuse in the criminal justice system is often approached as a security issue only. This has to be balanced with adequate treatment which puts preventing deaths in custody at the forefront. The overarching review on drugs by Dame Carol Black argues for a whole systems approach.

Before the pandemic, during the Keeping Safe consultation, Inside Time readers told us that drugs, debt and suicide were closely linked. Now both Covid restrictions and the introduction of body scanners in receptions have meant fewer drugs in prisons and less drug dealing and, in most places, a reduction in the violence that goes with them. As regimes open up, no one wants to go back to the days when, as one reader put it: “...I’m stuck in hell where it’s impossible to be a better man. I’m surrounded by drugs.” And another man explained: “Debt causes bullying and bullying causes stress and stress causes irrational thinking which causes self-harm.”

There are ways to keep people safe. The first is preventative. Short prison sentences can entrench people further into substance misuse. Whereas community sentences with drug or alcohol treatment requirements can ensure that people get the support, medication and treatment they need to make different choices. I have written jointly with the Chair of the Magistrates Association to ask the Treasury for continuity of treatment which puts preventing deaths in prison system.

No one knows just how many people in the criminal justice system die following substance misuse. The last dataset analysed for deaths in prison, now five years old, revealed that of the 89 drug-related deaths identified over a period of years, opiates were the most common drug type mentioned on death certificates. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) and HMPPS should collaborate again on a review to detail the current size of the problem in prisons with similar work carried out for deaths on community probation.

We need to learn more from investigations and expert clinical reviews. It’s essential to implement recommendations made by coroners and by the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman, who now has authority to investigate deaths after release on probation. Understanding who is dying, where, how and why would inform more effective work to prevent tragic and avoidable substance misuse-related deaths in the future. And save so much pain and heartache for everyone involved.

Juliet Lyon is Chair of the Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody (IAP)

The IAP would welcome your views on how to prevent drug and alcohol-related deaths. Please write to us at FREEPOST IAP - that’s all you need to put on the envelope, nothing else. We look forward to hearing from you!

Monies can be taken from your private cash, savings and spends accounts. This can be in the form of a lump sum, or in regular deductions, or a combination of both. This will be decided outside of the adjudication.

Also separate from the adjudication process, you must decide a minimum amount to be left in your account after payments towards the damage have been taken. This should be a minimum of £5 but can be more. To decide this they must take your personal circumstances into account, such as your need to maintain contact with family, your need to purchase any necessary items; any specific needs on ROTL or any needs relating to caring for a child in a Mother and Baby Unit.

If you are transferred between prisons, the recovery of outstanding compensation must continue at the new establishment. The debt can last for a maximum of 2 years until your sentence expiry date, whichever occurs first, and regardless of whether the full amount has been repaid at this point.

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