

Guest editorial

Richard Shuker and Jon Taylor

Richard Shuker is the Head of Clinical Services at HM Prison Grendon, Aylesbury, UK.
Jon Taylor is a Consultant Forensic Psychologist/ Psychotherapist at St Andrew's Healthcare, Mansfield, UK and is at HM Prison Whatton, Nottingham, UK.

Two years ago David Cameron, then Prime Minister of the UK, described his vision for a “truly 21st century” prisons system. Describing prison reform as a “great progressive cause”, he harnessed some of the values and principles that permeate the daily practices of therapeutic communities (TCs) by describing the men and women who come to reside behind the walls and bars of prisons as “potential assets to be harnessed” rather than “liabilities to be managed”. In a poignant and inspiring closing sentiment, Mr Cameron remarked that the “current levels of prison violence, drug-taking and self-harm should shame us all”.

Two years on the prison service faces significant difficulties. Some commentators have observed that the prison service is at “its knees”. At one prison, inspectors recently found conditions to be “fundamentally unsafe”; at another the conditions were the worst they have ever seen and the prison “dangerous to live in”. Both reports drew attention to the levels of violence and self-harm and the strained relationships that form the social fabric of these establishments.

Despite these criticisms, the public perception of a prison system being “in crisis” and the “scandalous” rates of reoffending cited there have, simultaneously, been promising and innovatory initiatives aimed at establishing a progressive and rehabilitative culture within the prison and probation service. This is evident in the development of new services where there is a focus on the potential of relationships to empower and inspire change. An energy has recently been evident where many working within forensic services have been galvanised into developing humane and optimistic social climates underpinned by a belief that where the conditions are right change can occur.

Rather than bowing our head in shame, it has now become clear that we can add substance to the progressive cause.

This edition of the *International Journal of Therapeutic Communities* may offer some of this substance as it blends together the collective, even communal wisdom from colleagues working in a range of forensic TCs. Combining evaluations of treatment effectiveness, narrative accounts of the living-learning experience of forensic TCs and philosophical and managerial considerations, we hope to offer meaning and understanding of the unique potential that TCs can offer for those with a forensic history.

Ian Williams and Gary Winship at HMP Dovegate offer a new conceptualisation of the operating characteristics of a TC. Describing what they refer to as H³ they provide a discussion on “hope”, “homeliness” and “humour” as three essential ingredients for an effective forensic TC. Their paper adds meat to the raw bones.

Complementing the thinking emerging from Dovegate, Jamie Bennett outlines his personal journey through the management of the first and largest prison TC in the UK at HMP Grendon. Bennett offers a perspective on the delicate balance facing prison TCs as wider systems demand a combination of retribution and cost efficiency alongside the optimism and rehabilitation that each prison community tries to offer those who have the courage to venture through the doors. He discusses the role of the governor as a central architect in the formation of the prison culture – the hope, homeliness and humour perhaps – and offers a view on a process of accommodating competing demands, a “duality rather than a dualism”.

If the combined wisdom of Williams, Winship and Bennett provides the framework for the progressive cause, the remaining papers bring to mind the detail and potential that imprisonment could offer. In a phased literature review of drug TCs, Laura Aslan highlights the potential that

TCs can offer for those who have developed a reliance on drugs. With particular attention being paid to the fidelity of TCs, Aslan draws attention to the need for long-term support and a pathway that sustains the living-learning experience beyond the time spent in a TC. The living and learning experience of imprisonment is the focus of the paper by Christian Perrin, Jayson Ware and Andrew Frost. They pull together a powerful review of the barriers that traditional prison cultures present for those men (largely) who have caused harm as a result of their sexual behaviour. In an exploration of the potential for peer-support, they eloquently highlight the affiliative gains that may emerge from a clear focus on the social relationships that men experience when imprisoned. The paper presents a compelling argument for the potential positive impact of a peer supportive environment for men who have convictions for sexual offences. Indeed, they illustrate the “potential assets” that may have been in mind when David Cameron launched his vision for UK prisons.

The final two papers of the edition then offer a more phenomenological experience of life inside a prison TC. With papers coming from HMP Grendon and HMP Gartree, we are afforded an insight into the process of change that again emphasises the potential of those who come to reside in prisons. Geraldine Akerman provides us with an articulate narrative that explores gang membership, a focus of the current UK Secretary of State for Justice, and the manifestation of this type of social relating within a prison TC. Noting that mainstream prisons can become a breeding ground for gang recruitment – perhaps as a mechanism to promote survival within a harsh, but humourless and hopeless environment – Akerman describes how the power of the social milieu and the living-learning nature of a TC can promote the acquisition of new ways of relating. The mechanisms that underpin these emerging qualities are shared by the men who took part in the Gareth Ross and Jonathan Auty study at HMP Gartree. They capture some critical components of the rehabilitative culture and describe the relationship between these components and the individual motivation that sees prisoners move beyond their status as liabilities. Noting the experience of care and the need for a sensitive and embracing environment, they offer a reality confronting reflection from men who have had the courage to spend their time within a TC.

This edition provides some persuasive and convincing evidence that therapeutic communities are active, alive and well within forensic TCs. However, it also goes one step further. It also makes clear that they continue to provide a necessary and highly relevant contribution to forensic services where they have shaped and inspired developments which would, until recently, have been unthinkable.