

Community Coalition on Corrections

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MEDIA RELEASE

HEALTHY OR HARMFUL? MENTAL HEALTH AND THE NEW PRISON

“If the Government believes that its new ACT prison will rehabilitate then it must give top priority to establishing a prison regime that promotes mental health, which it does not appear to be doing,” said Bill Bush, Secretary of the Community Coalition on Corrections.

This is the nub of the Coalition’s study on Mental health and the operational regime of the new prison that Professor Ian Webster AO, Emeritus Professor of Public Health and Community Medicine, the University of NSW, is launching at a forum this lunchtime at the ACT Assembly.

“We are consigning to prison more and more people with a mental illness or disability,” said Professor Webster.

“Most significantly,” he continued, “female prisoners have very much higher rates of mental illness and substance use disorders than males. Why on earth, “he asked, “are they in prison? If anything the picture indicates they are the victims rather than the perpetrators of anti-social behaviours.”

The Coalition fears that the ACT prison is shaping up to replicate injurious features of the standard prison including:

- Frequent strip searching which will degrade all and retraumatise the many female detainees who will have suffered childhood sexual abuse. Radiation concerns will limit the capacity of scanning to replace the searching.
- Separation and isolation for any number of disciplinary and other reasons including suicide prevention. Seclusion is the reverse of therapeutic. Experience of it only make suicide in the weeks after release more likely. For men the rate is very high.
- Impediments to accessing the mental health care that is available. In the standard prison those who do seek mental health treatment are at risk of being seen by staff as attempting to evade the rigours of prison and by fellow prisoners as weak and unacceptably alien.
- The regimented routine of the usual prison directed at conformity and compliance within which some who are mentally disordered thrive reduces their capacity to cope with the contradictions and complexities of the world outside.
- The heavy emphasis placed on abstinence in the prison is associated with a high overdose death rate after release because most drug dependent people relapse.

Professor Webster stressed that the period immediately following discharge is a high risk one for mental health and individuals will need on-going contact, support and assertive follow-up in this risk period.

Two things need to be done to avert these problems. Mental health expertise must be brought into devising and managing the prison’s operational regime and there must be whole of government planning to remove the environmental risk factors associated with recidivism and worsened mental health when people leave the control of Corrections.

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16 April 2008

EMBARGOED
until 5 am 16/4/08

ACT COMMUNITY COALITION ON CORRECTIONS

Key recommendation of its study:

HEALTHY OR HARMFUL?

MENTAL HEALTH AND THE OPERATIONAL REGIME OF THE NEW ACT PRISON

- ❖ A corrections board should be established with mental health expertise to be responsible for the prison's operational regime. At the very least this board should include the persons holding the positions of Director of Mental Health, ACT and Chief Psychiatrist, ACT and the Corrections Medical Officer.
- ❖ A comprehensive system of dynamic security should be introduced into the new prison involving:
 - close interaction between custodial officers and detainees rather than relying on barriers; and
 - a focus on meeting the needs of detainees with activities, services and practices.
- ❖ Addiction should be regarded as the mental health problem that it is and should be managed as such.
- ❖ Rather than giving top priority to making detainees drug free, priority should be given to people emerging from prison with the physical and mental capacity to take their place in society as responsible members who are capable of fulfilling their obligations both to those dependent on them and to the community at large.
- ❖ As a priority, all political parties should commit themselves to a corrections system that:
 - reduces recidivism in the ACT community;
 - rehabilitates those subject to it; and
 - bases measures to achieve these outcomes on the best available evidence.
- ❖ There must be put in place standing arrangements to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the prison by reference to what occurs to people after and not just on their release.
- ❖ There should be whole of government planning to set in place a seamless set of measures in support of those detained to be taken within the prison and out into the community. These measures should include adequately resourced community services and, in particular, prearranged mental health support.

The launch of a study:

Healthy or harmful?

Mental health and the operational regime of the new ACT prison

Speaker: Professor Ian Webster AO

Introduced by

Mr Brendan Smyth, MLA,
Deputy Leader of the Opposition & Shadow Minister for Mental Health

Wednesday 16th April 12.30 – 1:30 pm
ACT Legislative Assembly, Reception Room
Civic Square, London Circuit, Canberra City