

Reviews

Report on the Work of the Prison Department 1979. Home Office, Cmnd. 7965. HMSO. £4.00

The annual report from the Prison Department is with us again. Those of us who are regular readers eagerly scan it for the usual pictures of gorgeous new prisons, with the latest architectural design features, and the usual chapters on 'staffing', and 'the prison building programme'. Equally the fascinating switch in styles between the various sections keeps us entertained. The author of 'Treatment and Training' has a distinctly airy style 'Teachers taught and prisoners learned and for all concerned much quiet satisfaction was derived from the knowledge that useful work had been done'. The author of the chapter on religion seems to have been overwhelmed by the current controversies about language styles within the Church, he begins 'The religious interpretation of life asserts that a situation of crisis is not only a situation of judgement but also a situation of hope and, of course, new life'.

This year, however, we expected even more than usual because since the 1978 Report the May Committee, set up to investigate the United Kingdom Prison Services, has reported. Disappointment rewards such expectation. There is a usual brief summary of the May Committee's findings, and the Home Secretary's statement to the House of Commons; little else. There is a bland statement that the Government has accepted the new pay scales for prison staff, has rejected the idea of closing Dartmoor prison and is considering a significant extension of the prison building programme. May Committees may come and go, but as a society we seem to be quite incapable of even debating the major penal crises in our midst. The extent of the crisis is shown by the continuously rising prison population (peaking at 43,036 in November 1979 and breaking all previous records), the steady rise in the number of life sentence prisoners (1463 men and 50 women in December 1979), the rising number of incidents of self injury, including deaths by suicide, the sharp increase (by some 50,000, to 1,111,853) of the number of medical consultations sought by prisoners, the continuing high number of prisoner demonstrations (21 large scale ones in 1979), the use of the MUFTI (Minimum use of force-tactical intervention) squad in Wormwood Scrubs prison which led to criticisms and a police investigation, and the continuance of industrial action by staff (the latest occurring at the time of writing this note).

The chapter on health and medical services gives the usual indication of the high level of psychiatric disturbances within

the prison system. The regular complaints about the difficulties of getting mentally ill prisoners into NHS hospitals are prominent and there has been an upsurge of attempts to get prisoners moved on either sections 72 or 73 (Mental Health Act 1959), with a modest rise in the number of successful placements. One delightfully refreshing note in the medical chapter is the acceptance that 'Members of the prison medical, nursing, hospital officer and pharmaceutical services need opportunities to meet their colleagues from other establishments and *from outside the service* to discuss common problems and learn about developments in other fields' (my italics) with illustrations of how this is being achieved.

A new and, sadly, slightly defensive, addition to the medical report is a table giving the number of doses of various types of medicine given at each establishment during the course of the year. It is in response to the bash-the-prison-doctor brigade who seem to believe that medical staff have agreed to drug all trouble-makers into submission. Such naiveté would be amusing if it did not cause so much anguish to staff, prisoners and relatives alike. Unfortunately, however, the new table is not an outstanding success, for it is difficult to know what it means when it tells us that (for example) 220,538 doses of psychotropic drugs, and 45,276 doses of hypnotic drugs were given at Brixton prison during 1979. This does not give much idea of how many prisoners were on these drugs or what quantities were used. It is going to be very difficult to satisfy the anti-medical critics, but numbers of patients and quantities of illustrative drugs might just be more meaningful. The tables should also include the average daily population at each prison. If these figures are added, it is clear that Grendon is true to its boast that it does not use psychotropics and hypnotics very much, and that women's prisons are the really big users, the large male establishments with intensive medical facilities such as Brixton and Parkhurst coming well up the list. On average, the English prisoner receives 36 doses of psychotropic drugs and 8 doses of hypnotic drugs per year. There are no comparable data for the general population, but those of us who know prisoners quite well can see that there is some substance to their complaint that, by and large, prison doctors are stingy with the sedatives!

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