Autism training needs within the Scottish Prison Service

Studies suggest that autistic prisoners are at a higher risk of:

- being bullied or exploited
- receiving negative attention from prison officers
- increased self-isolation
- being unable to access suitable rehabilitation programmes.

In addition, they often have a unique and complex set of needs, including co-morbid health and other conditions (Allely, 2015; Allen et al, 2008; McCarthy et al, 2016; Myers, 2004; Paterson, 2007). Staff may view autistic prisoners as disruptive and remorseless, leading to increased rules against them, or as overly compliant with sudden unexpected outbursts (Allely, 2015, Allen et al, 2008; Berryessa, 2016).

Prevalence rates

The prevalence rate of autistic people in prisons is unknown. A range of studies indicate a higher rate when compared to the general population, ranging from 3% to 27%, compared to an estimated rate of 1% in the general population (Fazio, Pietz & Denney, 2012; King & Murphy, 2014).

Despite the lack of certainty around prevalence rates, it widely agreed that there is a group of prisoners with clinically significant autistic traits (Allen et al., 2008). There are concerns that having a large proportion of undiagnosed autistic people in prison may lead to potential difficulties around rehabilitation, management and the future risk of reoffending (Ashworth, 2016).
Staff knowledge

For people to receive the best possible support there needs to be knowledge and awareness amongst frontline staff. Various studies have evaluated prison officers’ understanding of autism.

One by Browning and Caulfield (2011), suggests that up to 90 percent of criminal justice professionals lack adequate understanding of autism. This often leads to staff showing a lack of empathy towards autistic prisoners, with them being misunderstood and viewed as cold, calculating and/or remorseless. Other studies suggest that autistic prisoners are labelled as difficult or disruptive and can therefore be more likely to face disciplinary proceedings, which then adversely affects their future outcomes (McCarthy et al, 2016; Michna & Trestman, 2016).

McAdam (2009) used a survey questionnaire to assess the knowledge of staff at a UK prison. She found a large amount of prison officers were unaware of working with autistic prisoners. This contrasts with a large amount of staff (80%) which belief that autistic prisoners suffer from higher levels of stress. This indicates that although prison officers have an awareness of autistic peoples’ experience within prison, this does not translate into daily practice. The study concludes with a recommendation for further training of prison officers (McAdam, 2009).

Scotland’s prison service

A study that evaluated the Autism Quotient (AQ) as a screening tool within the Scottish Prison Service also reported a lack of knowledge and understanding amongst frontline prison staff (Robinson et al, 2012). Myres (2004) also reported a lack of autism training and knowledge within Scottish prisons.

More recently there have been a number of initiatives that have highlighted the need for prison staff to have a better awareness of autism. A report on autism prevalence and support within HMP Barlinnie emphasised a need for a better understanding of the specific needs of autistic prisoners by frontline staff (Gallagher and Rooke, 2007). Similarly the National Health Service Greater Glasgow and Clyde (NHSGCC) prison healthcare report highlights the need for autism awareness training for all prison staff and the development of advanced
autism training for prison staff working directly with prisoners who are known to be autistic (NHSGCC, 2014).

A debate in the House of Commons discussed the need for further autism training of prison staff (House of Commons Library, 2018), while in Scotland a Government consultation identified the whole criminal justice system as an area of focus for the next four years - in particular raising awareness of autism amongst frontline staff is seen as priority. (Scottish Government, 2018).

A recent study of prison officer’s knowledge within one Scottish prison on the outskirts of Glasgow, found relatively good awareness of autism. The majority of officers had knowledge of autism through family connections and from previous campaigns such as the National Autistic Society’s ‘Too Much Information’ campaign. The study concluded that officers found it difficult to translate their knowledge of autism into a custody setting, and would benefit from more applied training that offered solutions to difficulties they faced on a daily basis (Slokan, 2018).

The delivery of any additional training within prison operational systems is difficult due to limited resources and the requirement for mandatory training. In addition, the prevalence of other conditions, such as acquired brain injury, learning disability, ADHD and foetal alcohol spectrum disorders mean prison officers need to have an overarching understanding of how to identify difference and appropriate pathways for each prison.

Current work in Scotland is looking at developing a values-based training course, giving prison officers a better understanding of vulnerable prisoners and clear pathways of seeking additional support. The focus is on teaching officers how to respond to prisoners struggling within the system, complemented by developing a network of experts that can provide support to staff as and when required.

References


Further reading

Do-IT Profiler launching Profiling in prisons across Scotland Accessed 21 June 2019

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