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Re: The identification and management of prisoners with autism is not perfect but is improving

Ashworth (1) draws welcome attention to the difficulties experienced by autistic prisoners.

The Autism Act placed a duty on the Government to produce strategies in relation to autistic people. These strategies contained actions for the criminal justice system (CJS) and the Ministry of Justice set up a cross-Government group to address them.

The National Offender Management Service (NOMS) commissioned the National Autistic Society (NAS) to conduct a review of the management of autistic prisoners (2). This was extended by Criminal Justice Joint Inspection (3)(4) which examined the treatment of autistic offenders within the entire CJS. These reviews found a lack of support and understanding of autism throughout the CJS.

Although an autism service has existed within the healthcare department at HMYOI Feltham since 2012, we aspired to a more pervasive, whole prison approach. We collaborated with the NAS to develop and implement standards and a framework for good practice to improve identification and support of autistic prisoners (5).

The NAS Autism Accreditation programme provides an autism-specific quality assurance programme for organisations. The NAS has worked internationally with a wide variety of organisations but this was its first collaboration with a prison.

HMYOI Feltham achieved Autism Accreditation from the NAS in 2015. It is the first prison worldwide to achieve this. It was mentioned in the most recent autism strategy progress report as an example of good practice.

This work attracted Ministerial attention, was discussed in Parliament and was visited by the All Party Parliamentary Group for Autism. In March 2015 the Prisons Minister issued a statement encouraging all prisons to seek Autism Accreditation.

Over 25 prisons have registered interest in working towards Autism Accreditation and a network has developed to share best practice. Pilots have begun to develop similar standards with the National Probation Service, Community Rehabilitation Companies and Police.

300 words

Competing interests: Clare Hughes is employed by the National Autistic Society which charges a fee for participation in its Autism Accreditation programme.

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