Suicide among women prisoners at a record high, report says

Suicide and self harm among women prisoners in England and Wales are at a record high, says a report by the Prison Reform Trust, which warns that prison is becoming a dumping ground for women with mental health problems.

Funded by the Nuffield Foundation, the report calls on the government to invest in mental health provision, drug treatment, and supervision in the community as an alternative to prison for vulnerable women accused of non-violent crimes.

Ten women took their own lives between January and the end of June this year in English prisons, four of whom were aged under 21. Nine women committed suicide in prison last year, more than in any previous year.

Suicide rates among male prisoners are lower, at 85 out of 68,000 last year. The female prison population of England and Wales is 4,997.

Owen Dyer London

Troubled Inside: Responding to the Mental Health Needs of Women in Prison can be bought from the Prison Reform Trust, 15 Northburgh Street, London EC1V 6JR, price £9.

Trial of supervised drug injecting room considered a success

An evaluation report into an 18 month trial of Australia’s first medically supervised injecting centre has cleared the way for the continuation of the SA24tm (£1m; SUS1.6m; €1.4m) a year project.

The 233 page evaluation found that from May 2001 to October 2002, 3810 registered individuals made 56 861 visits to the centre. A total of 409 incidents of drug overdose were recorded—including 329 from heroin and 60 from cocaine—though none were fatal.

The report estimates that at least four lives were saved as a result of the proximity of users to medical staff.

The centre opened in May 2001 (BMJ 2001;323:552) in Kings Cross, a district in inner city Sydney. The government approved the trial in the hope that it may “decrease overdose deaths, provide a gateway to treatment, reduce the problem of discarded needles and users injecting in public places.”

Bob Burton Canberra

New consent form designed for release of medical records

The BMA and the Law Society have produced a new consent form for patients to sign when asking, through a solicitor, for their medical records to be released. The form is designed to ensure that patients give informed consent to the disclosure of their records, amid concerns that patients bringing personal injury legal claims may not always appreciate what they have given permission for.

The BMA’s head of science and ethics, Dr Vivienne Nathanson, said: “GPs routinely say to us that solicitors ask for patient records but provide no or insufficient evidence that their clients have actually agreed to this. Hopefully the new form will let doctors know that the solicitor has explained the nature and extent of the request for records and that the patient has agreed.”

Notes for patients that accompany the form say that if patients launch a claim, the court will be able to order the release of their records to their opponent’s solicitor, in case any of the information can be used to defend the claim.

Clare Dyer legal correspondent, BMJ

AIDS will affect us all eventually, Mandela tells London audience

Nelson Mandela has called for a new war against HIV and AIDS, arguing that it is claiming more lives in Africa than the sum total of wars, famines, floods, and other deadly diseases, such as malaria.

Speaking in London at the British Red Cross 2003 humanity lecture, the former South African president described HIV and AIDS as a “new war of global dimensions.” He said: “AIDS represents a tragedy of unprecedented proportions, unfolding particularly in Africa but with incidence and effect across the globe.”

Mr Mandela argued that the developed world must join the battle against AIDS more forcefully. Although the pandemic was now affecting the poorest countries with the least resources to deal with the threat, in the end it would affect us all.

He said: “It is no less than a war—a war that affects all of us ultimately … We are, in this modern globalised world, each the keeper of our brother and sister. We have too often failed in that moral calling.”

Dudoni Carlisle London

The form is on the BMA’s website at

www.bma.org.uk

Canadian doctors question marijuana for medicinal use

Two leading medical bodies in Canada have expressed grave concern over the federal government’s plan to have doctors dispense marijuana to patients for medicinal use.

The Canadian Medical Association has advised doctors not to participate in the programme.

Under the interim policy, the 582 Canadian patients who have met requirements of the Marihuana Access Regulations will be allowed to buy 30 marihuana seeds for $20 ($£99: $€140; $€1290) and grow them for medical purposes. They will also be able to buy a gram of dried marihuana for $5 ($£140 for an ounce).

At the same time, the federal government, forced by an Ontario provincial court ruling to come up with a dispensing plan, is itself unhappy with what it has produced. It calls the plan an “interim” policy that could be suspended at any time.

David Spurgeon Toronto