

WHY DRUG TESTING WON'T WORK

Written by Chris Tchaikovsky
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The case against mandatory testing for prisoners

by Chris Tchaikovsky.

The impact of mandatory drug testing needs to be looked at in the context of the Government's backing for greater use of custodial sentences to deal with drug users. This way of punishing the drug user is at variance with the thinking of experienced practitioners working in this field who believe that counselling and punishment do not go together and will not help addicts and that punishment and degradation actually feed addiction.

However, if magistrates and judges agree with the Home Secretary's policy that drug users can be both helped and punished at the same time and society can be protected as well, they will readily send more drug users to prison. This will of course not only increase the prison population but also the proportion of drug users in the prison system. Yet it is this growing drug user population which faces drug testing.

The basic problem is that mandatory testing will not work. Anyone who is aware of what really goes on inside prisons knows that it is a recipe for collusion between officers and prisoners. More money will change hands and swirl around the system than it (allegedly) does now. They would also know how unwise it is to increase the potential for prison officer blackmail and consider the security implications of this move. Will heavy drug users now add a supply of urine to the drugs they already carry internally? If so will officers be expected to handle split condom urine bags covered with menstrual blood or faeces dropped from the vagina or rectum of drug injectors?

Officers should have serious misgivings about testing for cannabis because they have traditionally sanctioned its use. As well as being concerned about their volte-face on the use of cannabis, officers should also consider the increased aggression that might result from its non-use. They should be even more concerned about their position when they are carrying out tests the result of which could extend a prisoner's sentence. I suspect some officers will

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discretely turn their backs on these tests in the same way as they have not so discretely turned their backs on the use of cannabis. And who would blame them when the Prison Service is placing them in such an intolerable position?

A few officers will be rendered more susceptible to violence and blackmail by the aggressive, clever and better-off barons than they are (allegedly) now. This will surely have implications for both the relationships between prisoners and officers and for the smooth running and security of the prison system. Is the Home Secretary aware that prisons, like any other peopled space, run on a traditional if tacit and formalised consensus? If that consensus breaks down - and there are already signs that it is - the whole community breaks down.

We will always be trying to dampen down dissent and talk down women's anger because we know that they will get even more hurt if they don't accept new rulings. But I think someone should spell the implications of mandatory drug testing before it is implemented. Otherwise the Home Secretary could very easily be looking at a string of European Court cases brought by prisoners.

Chris Tchaikovsky is director of Women In Prison.

□ Women In Prison (WIP) was established in 1983 as a support and campaigning group for women prisoners. It was felt that there was a need for a group committed to effecting real change within the women's prison system. By listening to, and gathering evidence directly from prisoners and ex-prisoners, and by making their experiences known, the aim is to change people's attitudes towards imprisonment. WIP continues to pursue its policy of employing ex-prisoners within the organisation .