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## LETTERS



## AUTISM IN PRISONERS

# Management of prisoners with autism is not perfect but is improving

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Ashworth draws welcome attention to the difficulties experienced by autistic prisoners.<sup>1</sup>

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

The National Offender Management Service commissioned the National Autistic Society (NAS) to conduct a review of the management of autistic prisoners.<sup>2</sup> This was extended by criminal justice joint inspection,<sup>3,4</sup> which examined the treatment of autistic offenders throughout the CJS. These reviews found a lack of support and understanding of autism throughout the CJS.

Although an autism service has existed in 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 good practice framework to improve identification and support of autistic prisoners.<sup>5</sup>

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 and is the first prison worldwide to achieve this. It was also mentioned in the most recent autism strategy progress report as an example of good practice.

This work attracted ministerial attention and was discussed in parliament. 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 for sharing best practice has developed. Pilot schemes have begun to develop similar standards with the National Probation Service, community rehabilitation companies, and the police.

Competing interests: CH is employed by the National Autistic Society, which charges a fee for participation in its autism accreditation programme.

Full response at: [www.bmj.com/content/353/bmj.i3028/rr-2](http://www.bmj.com/content/353/bmj.i3028/rr-2).

- 1 Ashworth S. Autism is underdiagnosed in prisoners. *BMJ* 2016;353:i3028. doi:10.1136/bmj.i3028 pmid:27255544.
- 2 National Offender Management Service. Improving services for offenders with learning disabilities and learning difficulties: a literature review. Aug 2013. Available at <http://bit.ly/2c4EQwV>.
- 3 HMI Probation (ed). A joint inspection of the treatment of offenders with learning disabilities within the criminal justice system: phase 1—from arrest to sentence. Jan 2014. <http://bit.ly/2cG6STe>.
- 4 HMI Probation (ed). A joint inspection of the treatment of offenders with learning disabilities within the criminal justice system: phase 2—in custody and the community. Mar 2015. <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/cjji/inspections/learningdisabilitiesphase2/>.
- 5 Lewis A, Foster M, Hughes C, Turner K. Improving the management of prisoners with autistic spectrum disorders. *Prison Serv J* 2016;226:22-6. <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/sites/crimeandjustice.org.uk/files/PSJ%20226%20July%202016.pdf>.

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