

From: Paul Mullen (Professor Paul Mullen, Clinical Director of Forensicare, Victoria's peak government forensic mental health authority.)

Date: 13 May 2008

Subject: Re: Mental Health Patient Trauma - early lockdown at Long Bay

Dear Mr Poynder

Thank you for your letter and the information about the current situation at the New Long Bay Hospital involving extended lockdown of prisoners, many of whom have serious mental illness.

The placing of mentally disordered individuals in effective isolation for a large part of the day is likely to be even more potentially distressing and disturbing than it would be to the general prison population. The extended lockdown may also impact on the appropriate timing of medication for those so confined.

In people with serious mental illness an important element in coping with their active psychotic symptoms is the interaction both with mental health staff and with other custodial staff and fellow prisoners. Left to themselves the delusions and the hallucinatory experiences become the sole way in which they understand and experience the world. They lose both the reality checks provided by everyday social interactions and the opportunity to obtain some kind of therapeutic assistance through interactions with trained professionals. The effect of this over any lengthy period is to potentially drive them further and further into their psychotic state. Given that their behaviour, at least in part, reflects the ongoing influence of their illness, this risks an increase in the disturbed behaviour. This is most likely to manifest in increasing irritability and aggression directed at staff and fellow prisoners. It is also likely to manifest however in self damaging and suicidal behaviour. In my opinion a regime which leaves a mentally ill person isolated for upwards of 18 hours a day is a recipe for inducing a deterioration in their mental health and potentially an exacerbation of self destructive and aggressive behaviours.

Inevitably in prison under certain circumstances lockdowns do occur. Brief lockdowns are distressing and disturbing to the mentally ill, but can be coped with by the staff and more importantly by the prisoners. When this becomes an extended practice, however, it risks inflicting serious damage on an already vulnerable and high risk population.

Yours sincerely

PAUL E MULLEN

MB BS, DSc., FRANZCP, FRC Psych.

PROFESSOR OF FORENSIC PSYCHIATRY, MONASH UNIVERSITY

CLINICAL DIRECTOR, VICTORIAN INSTITUTE OF FORENSIC MENTAL HEALTH