

Educational Strategies and Policy Development

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The topic of this paper is the role of education in policy development. This paper identifies the major educational stages in this process which have been significant in:

- responding to the AIDS issue;
- managing AIDS issues in prisons; and
- effecting lasting changes which include breaking down traditional departmental barriers.

NSW Prison AIDS Project

In 1985 the New South Wales Department of Corrective Services responded to the need for AIDS information by incorporating AIDS education into existing drug and alcohol programs for inmates. In 1987 a group of inmates from Bathurst Gaol developed a proposal for a more effective AIDS education program involving both prison staff and inmates. As a result, a pilot AIDS education program was conducted at Bathurst Gaol followed by the introduction of the New South Wales Department of Corrective Services Prison AIDS Project.

Initially, many staff and inmates did not see a need for AIDS education and most saw no reason or relevance for them receiving any information or education on AIDS. The most common feelings expressed by both groups were fear, hysteria and homophobia.

The prison community's response to AIDS was similar to that of the wider community. Many officers and inmates preferred to take the ostrich approach, keep their heads in the sand and hope that AIDS would disappear. Through media figures such as the Grim Reaper everyone received the message of fear and not the accurate information which was essential to alleviate the hysteria.

The Prison AIDS Project's main goal was to prevent the transmission of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) throughout New South Wales prisons and ensure prisoners infected with HIV had equal access to treatment and care as they would in the outside community. Rather than impose policies on the system, it was necessary to develop a

¹ The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policies of the NSW Department of Corrective Services.

proactive educational process which the system could own and which would become part of the system.

The two major objectives were to:

- develop a departmental infrastructure capable of managing the AIDS issue in all stages of development; and
- ensure inmates had the knowledge, skills, attitudes and the means to avoid HIV infection.

Phase One of the project began with securing funding and resources, and establishing a usable infrastructure which could survive prison policy and deal with AIDS issues. Delicate and sometimes difficult issues which involved a person's innermost values, attitudes and the subjects of drugs, death and prison policy were incorporated.

If the AIDS Project had tried to introduce an AIDS education program for inmates or officers at this early stage, it would have failed due to the lack of support from both groups. A need to know and understand had to be established. AIDS information sessions were held in each gaol for officers and inmates to provide accurate information and eliminate some of the myths, fallacies, fear and hysteria.

In an effort to raise the level of awareness amongst officers and inmates, an AIDS coordinator was employed to facilitate information sessions throughout the State's twenty-seven correctional centres. These sessions did not aim to change attitudes or behaviour and frequently resulted in displays of anger, representing fear, which were directed towards either the gay community or the Department of Corrective Services for not testing and not agreeing to disclose prisoners' HIV status. Despite the State's anti-discrimination laws most officers and inmates felt they needed, and had a right, to know who was infected with HIV.

At this stage, although departmental policy supported the AIDS education program, it was very apparent when it came to funding, how low a priority AIDS education was given. Initially, there was only sufficient funding for one AIDS coordinator, to educate 5500 inmates and 3000 custodial officers in twenty-seven geographically distinct and sometimes isolated centres.

As the level of AIDS awareness was still quite low during this phase there were no demands placed on the Department of Corrective Services to provide policies and procedures. This situation has indeed changed in three years! Medical specialists from the community were contracted to help during this initial phase, to boost the level of credibility of the AIDS information sessions. The AIDS Project also benefited from this additional support. This strategy was successful in breaking down traditional barriers within the Department, in that Departmental initiatives are not always welcomed or supported by either inmates or officers.

The AIDS Project has shown a commitment to adhering to and respecting both the overt and the covert prison rules and regulations. At times this has meant working within the time restraints of the institution, for example, being locked out of gaols after travelling for hours, due to a shortage of custodial officers within the institution.

The main achievement during the first phase of the project was the establishment of an infrastructure providing each institution with the opportunity to be responsible for AIDS education and have the capability of dealing with AIDS issues within the institution.

The underlying theme advocated by the AIDS Project was self-ownership and self-management of AIDS issues by both officers and inmates at each gaol. This theme was based on the premise that:

[i]nformation given on its own does not change behaviour or attitudes. The prison system is made up of two self-sufficient, highly developed, hierarchies and hard to access groups - officers and prisoners. Both of these groups are traditionally antagonistic towards one another, administratively interwoven and driven by an unpredictable political agenda (Scagliotti 1990, p. 3).

For these reasons, the very idea of prison officers working with inmates towards the same goal was unprecedented and challenged many traditional barriers.

At this stage two more AIDS coordinators were employed, funded by the AIDS Bureau in the New South Wales Department of Health. The State was divided into northern, western and metropolitan regions and, over a six-month period, an AIDS Action Committee was set up in each New South Wales prison. A prison officer from each institution was appointed as AIDS Program Organiser to chair the committee and liaise between the prison and the AIDS coordinator. This voluntary position is the linchpin of the structure and requires a special type of officer who has a commitment to the AIDS issue and also credibility with other officers, prison management and the ability to relate to inmates. The inmates on the AIDS Action Committee volunteer for selection. They are chosen on their commitment, length of sentence and credibility with their peers. Wherever possible representatives from the Prison Medical Service, psychology, drug and alcohol, welfare, education services and, in some cases, the prison chaplain also act on these committees. This group forms the infrastructure which has proved successful in maintaining AIDS awareness and focusing on educational strategies in all New South Wales prisons. Despite the fact that New South Wales has a flowthrough of 15 000 prisoners per year these committees have remained active due to the strength of this infrastructure. In a twelve-month period more than thirty different educational strategies were developed by the AIDS Action Committees throughout the State. Some of these included, video productions, T-shirt design, songs, plays and the latest idea for World AIDS Day - the release of helium filled balloons from gaols across the State to signify people who have died from AIDS in Australia and to raise money for the Kids with AIDS Appeal.

The AIDS Action Committees gained support from the prison system as AIDS awareness increased due to the educational process and people within the prison community were willing to take responsibility for the problem. As a result, educational strategies have played a major role in policy development. Policy has developed in response to education and as peoples' awareness of AIDS education has increased, so has the system's need for policies to reinforce this process. Then lasting changes can be accomplished. One example of a change which has occurred, is the provision of Milton bleach tablets for use by inmates for general cleaning purposes.

Phase Two of the project has focused on building on the awareness phase with skills-based training for both officers and inmates. The AIDS Project moved into this phase during the middle of 1989 with the introduction of the Prisoners Peer Education Program and the Officers Seeding Course. The AIDS Project worked proactively, concentrating attention on the educational needs of the two target groups rather than reacting to political agendas such as the proposed introduction of compulsory HIV testing.

The idea for a Prisoner Peer Education Program came from a small group of inmates at Bathurst Gaol and was implemented following a successful trial. The Centre for Education and Information on Drugs and Alcohol (CEIDA) was contracted by the Department of Corrective Services to develop a package from the model which could be implemented across the State. Planning for the implementation of the Peer Education Program was meticulous so that the prison system would both accept and support it.

Each institution was given the responsibility of organising the program which was coordinated through the AIDS Action Committee and the AIDS coordinator. Once again, the underlying theme of self-ownership of the program and self-management of the process was highlighted. The AIDS Action Committee used its own criteria to select suitable participants to undertake the program.

Despite the demands this program placed upon prison management at times, such as superintendents agreeing to paid work release for inmates to attend the program, it has been very successful with forty programs completed throughout New South Wales institutions. Four hundred and eighty-nine inmates have participated over a twelve month period. The program has been adapted to cater for the needs of Aboriginal prisoners and those with developmental disabilities.

The program has been in high demand. However, had it been imposed on the prison system before there was a perceived need for it, it would have failed.

The benefits of the program are numerous. For example, counselling skills learned by inmates will be extremely useful following the introduction of compulsory HIV testing. These skills will help prisoners assist other prisoners with support and information.

Another major benefit of this program is the self-esteem inmates have gained from participation. The program uses adult learning methods and participants are rewarded on their contribution and completion of the four-day program rather than on academic merit. For many participants this course represents the only thing they have successfully completed in their lives. The self-esteem they gain is a prerequisite for behaviour change. An inmate who has no self-esteem will not care enough about him/herself to use safer sex practices or to use intravenous drugs safely.

A useful adjunct in AIDS education for prisoners is the 'Gaulwize' comic and kit developed by Streetwize Comics. Despite controversy surrounding some of its contents, it has received ministerial approval for distribution throughout all New South Wales prisons. Comics can be a useful educational tool when it is remembered that up to 40 per cent of inmates in New South Wales prisons have some degree of literacy problem (NSW Department of Corrective Services, 1990). 'Gaulwize' was also successful in reaching out to those who would be unreceptive to other more formal methods of education.

Management of HIV/AIDS issues for officers constituted the second target area in Phase Two. Increased HIV/AIDS awareness amongst officers changed attitudes from not wanting to know about AIDS to requests for information on 'how to handle the situation'. A course similar to the inmates' Peer Education Program, was designed to train selected officers throughout the State. This course has been in high demand and the Department has pledged its support and funds to enable officers to attend.

The Prison AIDS Project is presently entering Phase Three of the educational process - integration. '[t]he building into the Departmental structure of key training programs, policies and management strategies required to manage the AIDS issue in the long term' (Scagliotti 1990, p. 2). The Peer Education Program has entered this phase with CEIDA developing a Train the Trainer program targeted at training staff from each centre so the Peer Education Program is ongoing and is built into the system. The same process may be necessary for the officers' management program.

By integrating these programs the dangers of repetition, stagnation and compartmentalisation are avoided. The role of educational strategies in program development, therefore, must respond to the need for change.

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