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**Letter to the editor: Can prisons be trauma-informed? Reflections on the development of a trauma-informed approach**

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**Revised manuscript****Can prisons be trauma-informed? Reflections on the development of a trauma-informed approach**

There has been increasing interest in the development and implementation of trauma-informed approaches within prisons and the wider criminal justice system. Within the prison population, there is a high prevalence of adverse and traumatic events in childhood (Baranyi et al. 2018). These developmental experiences in turn increase the likelihood of poly-traumatisation throughout their lives (Ford and Delker, 2018). , Facer-Irwin and colleagues (2022) found that 74% of men in a London prison have experienced six or more traumatic events throughout their lives. Female prisoners have even higher rates of trauma exposure, including sexual and domestic violence before imprisonment and exposure to violence during childhood (Bradley et al. 2021; Lovell et al. 2022).

. The prison environment and regime can be inherently damaging to mental health, and can be a risk factor for suicides in prison (Armour, 2012; Zong et al. 2021). Factors include disconnection from family and social support, loss of autonomy, diminished meaning and purpose, increased boredom, overcrowding, unpredictability of sentencing and other adverse experiences (Edgemon et al. 2019). Reception and release into the community are particularly difficult times, that are associated with higher rates of suicidality (Bukhten and Sakseth, 2021; Pratt et al. 2006) In addition, exposure to violence, suicide, or self-injury, bullying and victimisation lead to a high risk of traumatisation or re-traumatisation within prisons, and 75% of male prisoners report being exposed to traumatic events whilst incarcerated (Facer-Irwin et al. 2022).

Mental health conditions are under-detected within prisons, and there are complex psychosocial factors that mediate outcomes. These include short stays, uncertainty about sentencing and high levels of co-morbidity including co-occurring mental health conditions, substance misuse and neurodevelopmental conditions (Facer-Irwin et al. 2023). These complicate the identification of mental health conditions and stratification of treatment interventions, reinforcing the need for effective clinical pathways.

There has been increasing interest in the development of integrated pathways that offer a consistency of care between settings and services across prisons and the community (Crole-Rees and Forrester, 2022). These aim to achieve a more joined-up, integrated approach across services to meet the physical health, mental health and social needs of people who experience multiple social disadvantages (Schneider et al. 2021). However, there is currently a lack of evidence about the

impact of integrated trauma pathways and whole-system trauma approaches on the outcomes for service users, and a lack of consistency when defining their components (Jankowski et al. 2019).

Various trauma-informed approaches within prisons have been implemented and evaluated with promising results (Atkinson et al. 2023, Bradley et al, 2019). National trauma-informed frameworks, that detail the knowledge and skills needed by workers to respond to those affected by trauma at different stages in their recovery, also offer promise, and may be a starting point for adaptation within prison settings (NHS Education for Scotland (NES), 2017). A central theme of these frameworks is that supportive, compassionate and empowering relationships are central to establishing psychological safety. This principle raises particular challenges within prisons, where relationships are non-consensual and explicitly hierarchical, with an emphasis on control and security (Jewkes et al., 2019). In addition, the psychological impact of working with traumatised groups has been documented, and may include burn-out, hopelessness and secondary traumatisation (Peters et al. 2020; Lemieux-Cumberlege and Taylor, 2019). These lead to high levels of staff turnover, and may have an impact on their attitudes and behaviour towards prisoners and each other (Crole-Rees et al. 2023, in submission).

In a recent systematic review of trauma-informed staff training programmes in prisons, Purtle et al. (2018) concluded that, although training staff members about trauma-informed practice seemed to improve their knowledge, attitudes and behaviour towards others in the short-term, it was less clear whether the training translated into meaningful outcomes for people in prison. Similarly, other recent studies have suggested that, although prison staff identified a clear role for themselves in creating a more trauma-informed environment, the realities of prison practice mean that there are multiple challenges in embedding these approaches. These challenges include the scale of need together with lack of resources, factors linked to the physical and cultural prison environment, and challenges relating to staff support such as access to training and supervision (Vaswani and Paul, 2019). Both staff and prisoners view the quality of relationships between staff and prisoners as the most important aspect of trauma-informed practice (Auty et al. 2022).

In order to facilitate a consistent system-wide approach and build capacity across the whole criminal justice system, and within community health, social care, and voluntary sector services, a large-scale trauma informed training programme is necessary. However, the optimal approach to ensuring sustainable implementation across the workforce is unclear (DeCorby-Watson et al. 2018; Singla et al. 2017). Furthermore, it is clear that the effectiveness of any training is strongly mediated by complex organisational factors within prisons, such as environments, policies, recruitment and leadership (Unick et al. (2019). To encourage sustainable change, interventions must include

provision of skills to staff as well as supporting organisations to embed changes in practice or policy and strengthening the relationships between organisations (Benson & Brennan, 2018).

Trauma-informed approaches within prisons represent a welcome and necessary paradigm shift. However, further evaluation of the mechanisms of change and essential organisational components is necessary. Further exploration of the optimal method for delivery of training across a large workforce is important. The authors of this letter are undertaking research to explore the optimal approach to implementing a trauma-informed pathway, the publication for which is forthcoming.

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