FACT SHEET SERIES

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SELF-INJURIOUS BEHAVIOUR IN THE CASE OF ASHLEY SMITH

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According to the Correctional Investigator’s Office (2012), CSC research demonstrates that the number of self-injurious incidents in the Canadian federal prison system has more than doubled in the last five years, reaching a high of 822 incidents in 2010-2011. In 2010–2011 three quarters of the total number of incidents occurred in maximum-security prisons and in multi-level institutions (the five regional psychiatric treatment centres or the regional prisons for women); roughly one third of these incidents took place in segregation units. As illustrated in the Ashley Smith case, despite the rise of self-injurious incidents corrections continues to respond to this behaviour as an institutional risk requiring enhanced management and control.

- Ashley accumulated 50 criminal charges, 501 institutional charges, and 800 documented incidents over the three years she was in the NBYC, and 150 institutional charges in the adult system, primarily related to her self-injurious behaviour (i.e. superficial cutting, head-banging, or tying ligatures around her neck). When staff attempted to subdue her following a (or attempted) self-injurious incident, Ashley frequently resisted by spitting, hitting and biting.
- While Ashley’s self-injurious behaviour in the NBYC reached an all-time high (16 incidents) in September 2006, the institutional response was to place her on “15 minute checks”, followed by granting her transfer into the adult prison system the following month.
- The NBYC cited a number of reasons for Ashley’s transfer to the adult federal system, including: “poor choices” (e.g. self-injurious and generally resistant behaviour) that negatively affected her, her fellow prisoners, and the institutional staff at the NBYC; that she placed a significant strain on institutional resources; and that NBYC had no further solutions to respond to her behaviour. In fact, significant weight was placed on the assurance that transferring Ashley to the Saint John Regional Correctional Centre would grant her access to additional institutional programs that were unavailable in the NBYC. The courts failed to recognize that the programming offered was prohibited for female prisoners who did not exhibit ‘good’ behaviour – meaning Ashley’s ongoing self-injurious behaviour would exclude her from participating in these rehabilitative programming efforts.
- Despite anticipation for enhanced support in the adult system, correctional efforts to control Ashley’s self-injurious behaviour intensified and were demonstrated by the continued use of segregation, restraints and force, involuntary transfers, and involuntary therapeutic injections. In turn, Ashley’s self-injurious behaviour continued to worsen in both frequency and severity.

Questions Raised

1. Given the deteriorating effects correctional responses had on Ashley’s mental and physical wellbeing, why were no alternative responses considered and tried?
2. How can we ensure the protection of prisoners’ welfare when senior administrators have the power to choose when or if correctional staff will intervene?
3. What safeguards does CSC currently provide or promise for the future to prevent such incidents?

Facts retrieved from:


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