

# remember those in prison

Anastasia Chitty describes an unusual clinical placement



## first encounter?

Picture being assaulted by your own father. Not for taking coins from a jar on the mantelpiece, but for having lacked the nerve to simply smash-in the shop window and steal the toy you wanted. This was the reality for Peter Woolf, and as I sat in the school assembly hall late one Friday afternoon ten years ago, I was captivated by his life. By the difference between my own privileged upbringing and the challenges he faced, but also by the potential that exists to break free from the cycle of reoffending.

Fast forward a decade. Since becoming a Christian, my desire to serve offenders has grown by understanding the need to reach the 86,000 men and women living behind bars with the good news of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> Greater than freedom from offending is the freedom from sin we all need and are promised through Jesus. 'So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed' (John 8:36). While we are all sinners, many have been sinned against awfully, and maybe this is why part of Jesus' mission on earth was a specific mandate to 'proclaim freedom for the prisoners' (Luke 4:18).



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Inmates' vulnerability is highlighted in a recently commissioned report.<sup>2</sup> In English prisons, the average reading age is twelve, 70% of prisoners have diagnosed mental health issues, and 30% have been abused. Of children in care, 27% will end up in the criminal justice system. Children of offenders are more likely to become an offender than to graduate from university. Perhaps this is one context into which we are called 'to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering' (Hebrews 13:3).<sup>3</sup> There is a deep need for us to show love and compassion, and so as a medical student, I seized the opportunity to experience how I might be able to share the hope of Jesus with those in prison.

### a challenging environment?

I spent an inspiring day shadowing a GP in prison and the variety of presentations surprised me. A simple musculoskeletal presentation could be followed by the need to manage an unusual congenital myopathy, all the harder within the constraints of a prison environment. As anticipated, psychiatric cases were diverse, encompassing drug dependency through to a case of gender dysphoria. The practice environments were as diverse as the presentations, ranging from medical and psychiatric 'inpatient' areas to tiny consulting rooms on the prison's wings.

While I was impressed by the provision of healthcare, it became clear that prison medicine has its challenges. A 'tubigrip' bandage couldn't be prescribed owing to a lack of scissors. The frustration of obtaining adequate security escorts for outpatient appointments was apparent. In addition to resource constraints, I was also aware of the complex challenge presented by the manipulative behaviours displayed by some prisoners.

### holistic care? body, mind and soul?

Nonetheless it was opportunity, not the challenge, that made the greatest impression. Crucially, the prison GP in England is independent of the custodial staff; an advocate for prisoners. By doing whatever is possible to bring about a good clinical outcome, by listening to a prisoner's needs, and by loving them as a neighbour, compassionate healthcare has the potential to help restore broken lives. It was a privilege to witness the powerful relationships that existed between GP and prisoner and the foundation this offered for deeper conversations. I was encouraged by the very real openness of prisoners to discuss matters of faith, and their eagerness to find hope in the darkness. In just the single day I was visiting, there were numerous opportunities to talk of Christ, not least in encouraging those already putting their faith in 'a god'. It was deeply humbling to observe how the GP spoke with a terminally ill prisoner facing the reality of death. By taking time to listen to his fears and to discuss the hope he can have in God, I'm sure the prisoner experienced a little of the love Jesus has for each of his children. Wonderfully, the GP could help this man practically as well, by ensuring he had glasses to read the Bible and regular visits from chaplaincy. What a reminder of the link between body and soul!

We are no different from this man; we too are sinners facing death - but by the grace of God, through Jesus' death on the cross, we've been given eternal life. This is redemption, it is freedom, and what a privilege it would be to share this good news with such an underserved group of society. ■

#### REFERENCES

1. Prison Population Figures [bit.ly/2iLdLdD](http://bit.ly/2iLdLdD)
2. Balancing Act: Addressing health inequalities amongst those in contact with the criminal justice system *Revolving Doors*, 2013 [bit.ly/2jD3x1q](http://bit.ly/2jD3x1q)
3. Of course, this verse in its strict context refers to fellow Christians in prison. We need to be careful not to 'idolise' prison ministry as more 'special' than other forms of ministry to the vulnerable. But if we take seriously Jesus' concern for the poor and vulnerable, it is easy to see that prisons are a natural place where will find and be able to serve these people.