



No bars to progress

When Gary Rees saw the opportunity to build better links with colleagues in other prisons, he seized it.

DDN hears about the creation of 'Sparcle!'

'Seeing the same old faces coming back through the doors can be demoralising,' says Gary Rees, detox manager at Exeter Prison. 'You go through detox and maintenance with them again and again... I've known a guy who's been inside eight times. It gets quite soul destroying – you think, I'm not actually doing anything to help.'

While contending with these frustrations, Rees was invited to an international prison health conference, where he met others from the prison service who worked with substance misuse and detox. There were nursing staff and some who had worked in voluntary agencies before being employed in CARAT (Counselling, Assessment, Referral, Advice and Throughcare) teams. The mixed group of staff realised they all lacked peer support and a framework of

Health. Around this format, the group began to share effective practice, shining the spotlight on a different prison each time and looking at how they could share ideas to do things better.

Rees' own situation at Exeter Prison illustrated that of many other colleagues. 'Within the prison estate there are lots of us in different rooms doing the same job and none of us knows exactly what the others are doing,' he says. 'So this is about linking in with each other and fine-tuning ideas.'

The issues are wide-ranging, from staffing problems to prisoners' medication. One prison might have brought in methadone maintenance and be able to guide another on where to start. Another might give an informative talk on alternative therapies, sharing insight on acupuncture, yoga, Indian head

'Now we break it down. We have a list of those who are on drug detox, methadone or subutex maintenance, and those that are on alcohol detox.' Of course it's been a funding issue with alcohol, he sighs, admitting that he'd previously had to capitalise on a prisoner's minor drug problem compared to their major alcohol problem, in the paperwork, to get them into prison treatment programmes.

It's part of the uphill struggle to have alcohol problems taken seriously. 'You mention to people outside prisons about drugs getting inside and they'll say that's disgusting, you've got to crack down on that. You'll mention that prisoners manufacture illegal hooch and they laugh.'

Linking with colleagues through Sparcle has given a productive outlet to these frustrations. Meetings have hosted constructive debate and a better understanding of controversial initiatives such as needle exchange in prison. Staff from some prisons who were opposed to the idea began thinking differently when they heard colleagues from elsewhere explaining how it was working well for them.

Better communication with prisoners has been important to the group from the outset. Sparcle's handbook, called *A user's guide to coming off opiates*, was launched last May, with support from an educational grant from Britannia Pharmaceuticals. It's aimed directly at prisoners, and gives clear information on how to cope with coming into prison with a substance misuse problem. The text and illustrations are clear and unpatronising, with an emphasis on staying safe and detoxing at a manageable pace. Rees says the reaction from prisoners has been very positive, responding to their commitment to support them.

Such feedback has added to the group's momentum and Rees is spurred on by the thought that they are sowing seeds of change among colleagues within the prison system.

'If we don't do anything proactive and just wait to react, we're going to miss so many people,' he says. 'Even if there's only a handful of people who say "yes, it made me stop and think", it's worth it.' **DDN**

For copies of the Sparcle handbook, or for more information on Sparcle, email Gary Rees at gary.rees01@hmps.gsi.gov.uk



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standards. Detox regimes in Exeter were different from Cardiff or Bristol.

'So we met up in the evening and had a lot of discussion around what we felt was missing from our jobs and what we would like to see happening,' says Rees. The outcome was a pledge to meet up every three months through a group they called 'Sparcle'. The acronym came from Swansea, Park, Ashfield, Cardiff, Leyhill and Exeter prisons – 'with an extra "r" because we couldn't really call ourselves Spacle!'

True to their decision, the group met three months later with a guest speaker, Dave Marteau from Prison

massage. Knowing how to help detoxing prisoners relax and sleep better can be an important aid to their recovery and future wellbeing that might otherwise have not passed into a particular prison's dialogue.

Record keeping also stands a better chance of improving with peer support. Rees talks about prisoners with alcohol problems, which illustrates how the system is not always tuned to actual needs.

'We never used to record people having an alcohol problem,' he explains. 'But if they come in on drugs we record it for our key performance targets.' Talking about the illogicality of this prompted a new record system.