A Visit to Wormwood Scrubs

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In May 2009 whilst I was visiting the United Kingdom I had the good fortune to be invited to visit one of London’s main metropolitan prisons. I was delighted to have the opportunity to see inside this well known institution.

Not only is the main gate* of the gaol frequently shown on BBC television productions, a two part series had recently aired depicting life inside the gates. It depicted some of the worst aspects of life behind bars for offenders but thankfully it portrayed staff in a realistic fashion. We arrived the day after the first episode aired so there was much discussion amongst the staff and questions about how it seemed to us as outsiders and how did they look etc. After reassuring them they seemed to be portrayed in a positive light, I later had the opportunity to ask an offender what he had thought of the program. He replied that after his wife seeing the show his long process of convincing her that life was OK in “the Scrubs”, she was again upset and deeply concerned for his safety. This was possibly a silent side effect from the TV sensation.

Arriving at “the Scrubs” and being met by a Superintendent from the Ministry of Justice head office, we were introduced to the General Manager and then taken on a tour through the wings. It is an old style prison looking much like parts of Long Bay or Goulburn from the inside. The similarities that I immediately noticed were the layers of shiny paint covering thick stone walls with very small doorways leading into tiny cells. The closed widows and the presence of big heaters in the common areas were marked difference between these wings and older style wings in our centres.

One thing that was remarkably different in the Scrubs is that there is a full size church and a parish within the walls of the gaol. It has a Chaplain and his parish is the gaol. The original land the gaol is built on belonged to the church, who agreed to sell the land to the prison service under the condition that there, would be no hangings in the gaol. When the death penalty was still in force any inmates sentenced to death had to be transferred to another prison for their punishment to be carried out.

Programs

Since CSNSW has adopted a similar rehabilitation philosophy to the UK there was no surprise to find that programs are a part of most offenders’ daily routine. In fact some of the programs are the same. I was most interested to speak with the facilitators and hear how we share many of the same and some very different problems. They discussed with me how they had overcome some of the logistical problems one would expect in an institution with a population of over 3,000 offenders.

Wormwood Scrubs is a Category B prison for adult males, sentenced or on remand from the local courts. The prison has five main wings plus a number of smaller dedicated units.

• A & B wings - remand and sentenced prisoners
• C wing - prisoners on an Intensive Drug Treatment System
• D wing - workforce prisoners and Difficult to Manage prisoners

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E wing - resettlement of prisoners unit
• Super enhanced wing - enhanced prisoners who are considered to be trustworthy
• Conibeere Unit - prisoners who require a substance misuse stabilization regime

A common problem with CSNSW is not holding offenders in one spot long enough to complete the recommended program. One strategy that seems to work for them in the UK is to run the program up to four days a week and hold individual supplementary sessions to assist each participant with the therapeutic process and the integration of the information. They also had a custodial officer in the management role for scheduling, arranging and monitoring the delivery of the programs, leaving the therapeutic staff to facilitate only. This ensured the logistics of group work in a gaol setting ran smoothly with support from all areas.

By the end of the day my feet were tired as I had walked miles around this enormous institution and my mind was swimming with thoughts about how gaols seem the same the world over, but also the positive differences found in a new environment.

*In films set in Britain, when someone is shown being released from prison, the front entrance of Wormwood Scrubs is frequently chosen as a filming location, e.g.

• The Italian Job
• Billy Liar
• The Spy Who Came in from the Cold
• The Horse’s Mouth
• A Very British Coup
• Cass
• The Sweeney (TV) - One Of Your Own
• Porridge, in both the television series and film
• Minder, in the episode The Birdman of Wormwood Scrubs