Training Non-Psychological Staff in the Management of Sexual Offenders

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Abstract
Although it is yet to be empirically established, it is our view that the training of non-psychological staff to manage sexual offenders positively is of considerable importance. The NSW Department of Corrective Services has developed dedicated Senior Training Officer positions and training programs tailored to the needs of non-psychological staff that will case manage sexual offenders, both in custody and in community settings. Research has been commenced in order to determine whether this training has a positive impact on staff.

Knowledge about sexual offenders
Recent years have seen a significant increase in our knowledge of sexual offending dynamics, treatment, and risk assessment. This has coincided with an increased public awareness of the prevalence of sexual offending and its impact on victims (Koss, 1993). Not surprisingly this has led to an increased use of prison sentences and longer terms in prison for sexual offenders. Notwithstanding this, we now know that contrary to public opinion sexual offenders appear to re-offend at comparatively low rates particularly when compared to violent or theft offenders (Losel & Schmucker, 2005).

We also now know a lot more about the effective management of sexual offenders. There is a general consensus as to what should be addressed within sexual offender treatment programs and how to target these factors most effectively (see Marshall, Marshall, Serran, & Fernandez, 2006; Ware & Bright, in press). Large scale meta-analyses have reliably demonstrated a moderate positive effect of psychological treatment – that is, it appears to reduce sexual recidivism (e.g., Hanson et al., 2002; Losel & Schmucker, 2005). There is also a general consensus as to how to assess offender’s risk of sexual recidivism with at least moderate accuracy (see Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004). Recently, empirical research has started to establish the importance of staff, particularly therapists and their interactions with offenders. Previously, research tended to focus solely on the evaluation of the content of treatment programs. Evidence now exists that demonstrates that particular characteristics of therapists and the quality of the therapeutic relationship contribute significantly to the effectiveness of sex offender treatment (Marshall, et al., 2006).

What has not been discussed in any significant detail is the importance of non-psychological staff and their role in the effective management of sexual offenders. In our view effective treatment will always rely, to some extent, on the positive support of non-psychological staff although we acknowledge that this has not been established empirically. In other words, sex offender treatment may occur with a group therapy room and context; however it is the continued modelling of these positive skills and the positive support of non-psychological staff outside of the treatment context that may have a significant impact. We feel clearly that the positive support of non-psychological staff requires that they have effective and meaningful training in the management of sexual offenders, particularly as sexual offenders are usually viewed negatively.

Attitudes towards sexual offenders
Sexual offenders are often viewed poorly by other offenders and staff alike (Akerstrom, 1986). Hogue (1995), for example, found that prison officers who were not involved in the treatment of sexual offenders were significantly more negative in their attitudes towards sexual offenders than prison officers involved in treatment. Weekes, Pelletier, and Beaudette (1995) found that only 20.7% of custodial officers from their sample viewed sex offenders as treatable, rating them as more unchangeable, dangerous, irrational, mysterious, than non-sexual offenders. Of particular note, 68% of this sample of custodial officers indicated that they wanted more training in how to deal with sexual offenders and only 12.3% reported that their training had prepared them adequately enough. Lea, Auburn, and Kibblewhite (1999) also found that over a quarter of
“paraprofessionals” felt that sexual offenders were “abnormal”. The researchers in this study felt this was a cause of concern given that these sorts of views naturally separate sexual offenders from others and suggest that they are suffering from mental disorders when in fact the majority of them are not (see Ware & Allnut, 2008).

Why are positive attitudes towards sexual offenders important?
The role of custodial officers in the treatment of sexual offenders is often limited to the care and containment of the Unit in which the treatment takes place. Custodial officers can, however, have a significantly greater involvement, either as part of a prison unit designed and managed using therapeutic community principles (Baker & Price, 1995; Ware & Bright, in press), or less frequently as a co-facilitator of group therapy (Mann & Thornton, 1998).

Custodial staff can assist in the treatment of sexual offenders in a number of ways. Glaser (1969) found that a positive attitude by custodial officers was critical to facilitating change in sexual offenders prior to their release. Blanchard (1998) also suggested the stereotypes held by custodial officers also impacted either positively or negatively on how the sexual offender would respond to prison environments. Saghara and Wilson (2006) also note the importance of custodial staff not holding stereotypical beliefs about sexual offenders as these are likely to negatively impact on an offender’s adaptation to prison and motivation for treatment.

Sexual offenders are often reluctant to commence treatment. They may have heard myths about the treatment, may still be claiming innocence, or do not want to be identified as a sexual offender for fear of the consequences. Custodial staff case managing these offenders have a unique opportunity to assist in their motivation. It is easily argued that custodial staff also have the responsibility to model appropriate and positive attitudes and behaviours. Thirdly, custodial staff have a further opportunity of supporting a sexual offender’s attempts to make personal and psychological changes, i.e., through psychological treatment. Although we believe acting positively towards sexual offenders is critical it can be difficult. Custodial staff may experience the negative aspects of offenders as they are housed within prison such as their expressions of agitation and frustration. Sex offenders are often shamed by their offending, maintain secrecy, are defensive when asked to discuss why they are in prison, do not trust adults, etc. Furthermore, sexual offenders may be hostile, personally disordered, hold distorted beliefs about their offending, and have other such characteristics that make them difficult to interact with. As a further example, Parole and Probation staff also may be disliked largely due to their role in writing reports which may affect the offender’s ability to be released or to have access to his family. We believe that these difficulties even further reinforce the need for staff training.

NSW Department of Corrective Services “Principles of Sex Offender Management”
The NSW Department of Corrective Services recognises the importance of training and educating staff. There are two Senior Training Officer positions that directly report to the State-wide Clinical Coordinator Sex Offender Programs. The responsibility of these positions is to provide quality training to both custodial and community-based staff. A psychologist specialising in the assessment and treatment of sexual offenders also assists in the delivery of this training.
The 3-day “Principles of Sex Offender Management” course is aimed at all Department of Corrective Services staff that will have face to face contact with sexual offenders. The course is facilitated at the NSW Corrective Services Academy and a number of Correctional Centres and Community Offender Service offices around the state. The overall broad goals of the course are to:

1. Inform staff about central concepts in the management of sexual offenders. We believe this to be very important. In the Weekes et al (1995) study, they found that by enhancing the quality of the prison or community services personnel’s daily contact with sexual offenders, sexual offender’s perceptions of the institution or community regimes (parole) are likely to improve thereby increasing their confidence in treatment programs.

2. Enable informed decisions and case management planning to be made in relation to sexual offenders, both within custody and community settings. Sexual offenders often reflect on how negatively the “system” has treated them. Research suggests that this will
negatively impact on their motivation for treatment (Mann, Ginsburg, & Weekes, 2002).

3. Increase knowledge of potential personal impact of this work and provide staff with self-care strategies. Weekes et al (1995) found that custodial staff with greater years of service were more likely to report stress relating to dealing with sexual offenders than newer custodial staff.

The Principles of Sex Offender Management course is currently in two forms. One is specifically tailored to the needs of custodial staff whereas the other is for Parole and Probation staff. The topics covered in each variation of the course are similar yet it is tailored to the needs of the participants. These topics reflect the goals outlined in the previous section (see above). The specific topics covered include the following. Note that the actual content within each module will be different depending on whether it is delivered to custodial or parole and probation officers.

- Understanding the nature of sexual offending (dispelling myths)
- Understanding sexual offenders and the dynamics of their offending
- Positive strategies for working with (managing) sexual offenders
- Understanding risk assessment and risk management
- Knowledge on available treatment for sexual offenders and its effectiveness
- Enhancing knowledge of the positive case management of sexual offenders
- Reviewing worker issues and self care.

The training includes didactic teaching, group work exercises and role plays, exercises using case studies, demonstrations of positive management interactions, and watching videos. An assessment task is completed post training and evaluated by those who delivered the training.

Within the 2006/07 financial year, a total of 607 custodial and Community Offender Services staff attended the Principles of Sex Offender Management course. This was made up of 35 training sessions across 11 locations throughout the State.

Evaluations of training
Research of training programs for non-psychological staff has indicated that staff report increased confidence, knowledge and awareness of the nature of sexual offences and how to understand sexual offenders (Craig, 2005; Taylor, Keddie, & Lee, 2003). Hogue (1995) found more positive attitudes towards sexual offenders after training. Taylor, Keddie, and Lee (2003) measured the effectiveness of a 2 ½ day training course for nurses and social workers. This course was designed to assist these professionals in their management of sexual offenders with learning disabilities. They found an improvement in participant’s knowledge and attitudes towards sexual offenders at the conclusion of this training. Craig (2005) evaluated a 2-day training course designed for 85 hostel workers and probation officers. It appears that this training has similar goals and content as the NSW Department of Corrective Services “Principles of Sex Offender Management” course and is also targeted towards similar staff. These participants expressed significantly more negative views about sexual offenders than non-sexual offenders before training commenced. Craig (2005) found that the training did not change the attitudes participants held towards sexual offenders but it did change their levels of confidence and knowledge regarding the management of sexual offenders. The researcher cautioned that training attempting to change attitudes is best delivered over weeks (p.206) and that those delivering training should be very careful not to convey messages that might worsen attitudes towards sexual offenders.

Similar research has recently been commenced within the NSW Department of Corrective Services in an attempt to (1) establish normative data regarding attitudes towards sexual offenders and (2) evaluate of the effectiveness of the NSW Department of Corrective Services 3-day “Principles of Sex Offender Management” course. It is hypothesised that
participants will complete the training with (i) increased knowledge and confidence regarding working with sexual offenders, (ii) an increased willingness to work with sexual offenders, (iii) an increased belief in the efficacy of sex offender treatment, and finally, (iv) a more realistic notion of sexual offender risk of recidivism. Although this research is expected to be completed in 2009, preliminary evidence by way of participant evaluations of the Principles of Sex Offender Management training have consistently identified positive benefits for staff including increased knowledge and confidence in implementing case management strategies for sexual offenders.

## Summary & conclusions

It is our view that the training of non-psychological staff to manage sexual offenders positively is of considerable importance. Although it is yet to be empirically established, it is our view that effectiveness of treatment is likely to be enhanced when custodial and community services staff interact in a positive and effective manner with sexual offenders and in so doing allow the offenders to practice and rehearse the knowledge and skills learnt within treatment, or reduce their reluctance to commence treatment. The NSW Department of Corrective Services has recognised the importance of this and developed dedicated Senior Training Officer positions and training programs tailored to the needs of non-psychological staff that will case manage sexual offenders, both in custody and in community settings. Research has been commenced in order to determine whether this training has a positive impact on staff.

## References

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