



Smoking bans: officers want inside story

By David Stockman

Canberra Times, Thursday March 12, 2009

Prison officers are worried that a proposed smoking ban at the ACT's first jail will lead to a backlash from inmates.

The move would make the prison one of the first in the country

to ban smoking indoors.

The plan would see prisoners restricted to lighting up outside, but the ACT Government says full details of the policy are yet to be finalised.

The Government met yesterday the union representing prison officers, the Community and Public Sector Union, which sought more detail on the plan.

The Canberra Times understands until this week, the ACT Government was considering an outright smoking ban at the Alexander Maconochie Centre.

The CPSU's regional director, Vince McDevitt, said anxiety among prison staff was high when the plan was first mooted.

"There certainly was when it was proposed that the facility be smoke-free 100 per cent inside and out," Mr McDevitt said.

"This week we now understand there is to be some external facility made available for people to smoke."

Mr McDevitt said the CPSU had met the ACT Government yesterday and was seeking clarification from jail management before the jail opening on the arrangements and facilities to be available.

Rates of smoking among prisoners and officers are significantly higher than the national average. About 80 per cent of prisoners, and 40 per cent of prison officers, are smokers.

A spokesman for Corrections Minister John Hargreaves did not elaborate on how the plan may take shape.

"Smoking is not permitted inside any AMC building, including cells and cottages [and] the Government is currently developing a policy regarding smoking," the spokesman said.

A prison officer has contacted The Canberra Times expressing concern that the plan could lead to violence.

Last year the ACT Government backed away from a plan to have a needle exchange program in the prison.

It said the idea would be reviewed in 12 to 18 months. Prisoners were still expected to be provided with bleach to disinfect needles.

CT Editorial - Ban is right move

Canberra Times, Thursday March 12, 2009

To lock a non-smoker in a room with a smoker for up to eight hours or more would be considered unacceptable in this day and age. To deny a smoker a nicotine fix for that length of time would be considered by many to be equally harsh and unjust. Welcome to the dilemma of corrections authorities around Australia as they ponder whether to ban smoking in jails.

It ought to be an open and shut case: prisons, whether privately or publicly owned, are workplaces, and are governed by the same occupational health and safety requirements that apply to office buildings, schools, and hospitals. As such, smoking should be banned in all enclosed places within a jail, with designated areas outdoors to allow inmates, warders and other staff to smoke freely if they wish. But prisons are not your average workplace or public facility: inmates are there not by choice but by court order. Most jails continue to allow inmates to smoke indoors, partly because of views that to stop it would be further punishment, partly because of the difficulties of enforcing a ban and partly because cigarettes are seen as a way of alleviating boredom.

Now the ACT Government is set to make the Alexander Maconochie Centre subject to the same smoking restrictions that apply to other public buildings in the ACT. Some prison officers and prisoners advocates, not without some justification, are unhappy at the prospect. It is estimated that about 80 per cent of inmates and 40 per cent of prison officers in Australian jails smoke (compared with about 15 per cent in the general population), which means, potentially, that inmates at the Alexander Maconochie Centre will be even more grumpy and on edge.

Nevertheless, the ban is worth implementing. The long-term implications of smoking are well documented, and minimising it in prisons will have a positive impact on prisoners' health, which is already significantly worse than the general population. The Government must, of course, supply prisoners with nicotine patches or chewing gum to help them cope with withdrawal symptoms. The ban will enable non-smoking prison staff to breathe a little easier, and might even convince some prisoners to quit for good.

CRIMS WON'T DIE IN CHOKY

Dr Alan D. Shroot

president, ASH (Canberra Action on Smoking and Health)

Canberra Times, Saturday March 14, 2009

Congratulations, The Canberra Times, on your editorial ("Ban is right move", March 12, p18) supporting the ban on smoking indoors in Canberra's new jail.

Smoking is a health issue and all workers at the facility (especially the 60 per cent who choose not to smoke) must be protected from the dangers of sidestream smoke.

Indeed, the move can be seen as a crime prevention measure.

Potential criminals who are aware that, if caught, they will be incarcerated in a building where they cannot support their habit may opt not to commit the crime in the first place.

Nicotine is so addictive that the proposed legislation may act as a deterrent.

IRONY GOES UP IN SMOKE

Bill Bush

ACT Community Coalition on Corrections

Canberra Times, Saturday March 21, 2009

Was there intended irony in the publication in Saturday's Forum of the president of ASH's (Action on Smoking and Health) letter congratulating the ACT Government on its smoking ban in its new prison?

The Forum cover photograph of the muddy hell of the Western Front shows a soldier, fag in mouth.

Yes, those in the new prison should be given every opportunity, assistance, even encouragement to kick that habit and their other roaring substance dependencies.

The army 90 years ago may not have been aware of the severe harm smoking would cause well into the future but it was keenly aware of the immediate benefits of that drug in dealing with stress. That's why it included smokes in rations.

Life is about choosing priorities.

The troubled human beings in prison will have quitting smoking put at the top of theirs.

I would urge ASH and ACT ministers to talk to those who've experienced prison to ascertain where they'd rank that objective.

It is not particularly easy to slip outside to a designated smoking area when one is locked in a cell for 13 or 14 hours a day.

ASH also sees the ban as a crime reduction measure, speculating that smokers will think twice before committing a crime if they know they have to face a smoke-free prison.

Not likely. Thousands are in Australian prisons for crimes directly related to their heroin addiction.

Let's get real on this one: first things first.

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- [IRONY GOES UP IN SMOKE](#) - Bill Bush