

Shock therapy used on California prisoners



VACAVILLE, California (CUPI) — California State Prison authorities are just now putting the finishing touches on an intensive psychiatric prison centre at the Vacaville state mental facility to control "the aggressive, destructive, political inmate".

The new facility will house up to 80 prisoners and will open in late January or early February. The prisoners will be taken from the maximum security adjustment centres at Soledad, Folsom, and San Quentin. Psychiatrists will administer "aversion therapy" to inmates considered "the most violent".

The therapy may include electric and insulin shock, fever treatments, sodium pentothal (truth serum) interviews, anectine (a death-simulating drug), anti-testosterone injections (to neutralize sex hormones), electrode brain implants, and lobotomies.

Revealing letter

According to a letter that was ripped off recently, R.K. Proconier, California chief of the department of corrections, wrote on Sept. 8 to Robert Lawson, executive officer of the California Council on Criminal Justice:

"This letter of intent is to alert you to the development of a proposal to seek funding for a program involving a complex neurosurgical evaluation and treatment program for the violent inmate. Initially, following a screening at the Calif. medical facility at Vacaville, a period of acute hospitalization would be involved for a period of five to seven days.

After this during a period of two or three weeks the patient would undergo diagnostic studies — surgical and diagnostic procedures would be performed to locate centres of the brain which may have been previously damaged and which could serve as the focus for episodes

of violent behavior. If those areas were located and verified that they were indeed the source of aggressive behavior, neurosurgery would be performed."

The outlines of the new Vacaville facility have been leaking out to the press for the past few months, but detailed information was not available until Nov. 19, when the Department of Corrections held a "think session" at the University of California at Davis. The meeting was to get support among the psychiatric profession.

New centres failed

But, Dr. Edward Opton Jr., a Berkeley research psychologist with a strong liberal orientation contacted the Medical Committee for Human Rights after he attended the conference to get the information made public. According to his notes from the meeting, the Vacaville Centre has become necessary in the eyes of prison administrators because of the catastrophic failure of the relatively new adjustment centres, as demonstrated by George Jackson's "escape" murder from the San Quentin ac. Adjustment centres are maximum security prisons and Jackson, a noted black militant was shot in the back in an alleged "escape" attempt.

Far from understanding that the real causes of prisoner violence are in reaction to the highly repressive life they are forced to lead inside the adjustment centres, prison administrators seem to blame it on "some sort of inner organic inner agitator," according to Opton's notes.

The meeting was led by Dr. George Bach-y-Rita, the head research psychiatrist at the new unit. He mentioned a few of the treatments his personnel would experiment with. One would be the anti-testosterone injections to counteract sex drive and supposedly

reduce the tensions a prisoner feels "without the negative side-effects in terms of poor self-image that direct castration creates".

Bach-y-Rita also feels that about 10 percent of the adjustment centre inmates would benefit from partial frontal lobotomies in which sections of the brain controlling motivation and drive would be cut out. The method usually leaves the patient a passive vegetable capable only of simple tasks. Another experimental technique would be to implant electrodes in the brain to control behavior directly.

The basic method to be used on most of the prisoners will be "aversion therapy". Aversion therapy is aimed at making the prisoner sick or terrified every time he gets involved in violence.

Clockwork Orange techniques

It works like this: The patient is strapped into a chair in front of a movie screen. When he is shown movies of violence and sex, he is tortured; he may be given shocks or drugs to make him feel nauseous or like he is dying. His eyes are clamped open so that he can't turn away from the screen. (Clockwork Orange, anyone?)

The process is repeated daily until the man is deeply conditioned in his reactions. Supposedly, then, when the reformed prisoner tries to commit violence, his new drive takes over and makes him helpless. Aversion therapy using the death-simulating drug Anectine has recently been reported in the treatment of homosexuals at California's Atascadero State Hospital.

You don't have to worry, though, according to the administrators because the Vacaville treatments will be voluntary. "If they don't want to take the drug, they don't have to," says Dr. L.J. Pope, warden of the facility. "If they want to stay coo-coo and stay locked up all their lives that's all right with us."

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