

CONCLUSION

Prison health is public health. Prisoners come from communities which have limited access to public health services, and these are the same communities to which they will return. Recognising this, Dr Theodore Hammett explains the importance of appropriate HIV/AIDS programmes in prisons:

The disproportionately high burden of disease in correctional institutions identifies an extremely important opportunity to intervene aggressively with prevention and treatment programmes. Such interventions promise to benefit not only inmates themselves and their partners and families, but also the broader public health.²³²

The impact of HIV/AIDS on prisoners is most visible in the rising number of deaths in prison each year. What must be envisioned is the positive impact prisoners can have on HIV/AIDS. A serious problem for South African prisoners is boredom and idleness. They are locked up for two-thirds of the day, in crowded cells, with minimal lighting or space. Yet even these decrepit surroundings could become a classroom, if peer education programmes are supported and expanded.

If gang leaders are encouraged and empowered to become leaders in the movement for an AIDS free generation, then even the dark, dirty, and frightening quarters where prisoners spend the bulk of their time could become the seeds of behavioural change amongst young men in South Africa.

With targeted treatment and education regarding HIV, STIs and TB, former prisoners could be encouraged to develop a new identity as ambassadors for public health awareness to the under-served communities they represent. By providing prisoners with better health services, increasing their awareness, and reducing high risk behaviour, the Department of Correctional Services could make significant contributions towards an AIDS-free generation in South Africa.