



... We should never lose sight of the fact that correctional health professionals can help protect the health of communities throughout the country when they address the health concerns of offenders.

Overlooked, Undervalued ... Indispensable Correctional Health Professionals Work for the Public Good

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When most people hear the term health care professional, they think of their family doctor, specialists or hospital personnel. Scarcely, however, do many consider the men and women who have devoted their lives to providing medical care to our nation's jail and prison populations. These individuals face some of the most challenging circumstances of all medical professionals. Yet, because of the negative stigma attached to jails and prisons, they tend to be undervalued and overlooked as bona fide medical experts. While largely unnoticed in society, their efforts not only impact the patients they treat behind bars, but also the public at large.

Just as health issues in communities across the nation have evolved during the past two decades, so have those within correctional facilities. Not only does the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) estimate that 16 percent of inmates in the United States are mentally ill and are in need of mental health services, but correctional health care providers are also faced with treating offenders who suffer from serious physical health problems, including HIV and hepatitis. These mental and physical health conditions can cost thousands of dollars per offender patient per year to treat. In light of these statistics, it is not surprising that the fastest growing cost in many prison budgets is health care. Considering that the nation's incarceration rate rose 18 percent between 1995 and 2004, according to the DOJ, it seems likely that these costs will continue to escalate.

Compounding the struggle for correctional facilities to meet adequate funding for their patients' medical care is the widespread misconception that jails and prisons are incubators for infectious diseases. What most do not understand — or choose not to accept — is the fact that while incarcerated men and women have a higher prevalence of health problems than the general population, this is due to the sheer concentration of high-risk individuals in jails and prisons. In fact, the prevalence of infectious diseases in prisons holds a much more disturbing reality; it is actually a reflection of the ills represented in our communities.

On a daily basis, correctional health care professionals across the country are challenged with the significant security risks involved with treating inmates so that they can identify, treat and attempt to control communicable diseases that have been brought in from outside prisons and jails. There may be those who question why "the outside world" should care about the health of those behind bars. The answer is simple. Beyond mere human decency, the fact is most inmates eventually return to their communities. If they leave confinement with infectious diseases, substance abuse, mental illness or violent tendencies, they will not only be a threat to themselves, but will also become a threat to their families, neighbors and community members when they reenter society.

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when they address the health concerns of offenders. By providing prevention and educational programs to those in the high-risk population, they not only help to curb outbreaks within correctional facilities, but also protect the public from such outbreaks.

There are a number of effective steps that can be taken to improve public health within correctional institutions. In addition to solid medical care, education and prevention programs should be available to the offender population to assist them in taking better care of themselves and practicing healthy behavior. Moreover, links between corrections, public health and community-based programs must be created so that when offender patients are released, they can take charge of their actions and health. In so doing, the number of ex-offenders who "fall through the cracks" will decrease.

In many cases, the corrections environment is the first place in which at-risk offenders have had exposure to organized health care. By joining forces, the correctional health community can equip public health professionals with the tools they need to assist in providing preventative services and/or continued care of former inmates.

Undoubtedly, correctional health care providers are characteristically overshadowed by their counterparts who practice in more accepted domains of society. Even so, their contributions to the health care field far outshine their reputations by helping to eliminate health disparities and assist in bridging the gap between the corrections and the public health communities. ♦