

HMP Grendon

Paedophiles in treatment

Following the news this week that paedophile Robert Coello was found murdered in his cell lying in a pool of his own blood in the country's only therapeutic jail I was concerned what impact this would have on the future of the prison.

Concerned because I have seen first hand, the excellent work done at the prison and would not want to see this prison's regime disappear all because of one isolated incident

Coello was a 44-year-old former bus driver from Whitley, Berks serving a sentence for four counts of rape and 12 other sex attacks on a schoolgirl, and was attacked by a fellow inmate who had only been in Grendon for six months.

I have interviewed hundreds of sex offenders and paedophiles. However, when I was offered the opportunity to speak completely unrestricted and alone with some of the country's most dangerous child sex offenders, with no repercussions for them, about why they committed their offending behavior I considered this a great opportunity.

I was invited by the residential Forensic Psychologist to visit HMP Grendon in Buckinghamshire, a unique high security prison where inmates have to face up to and acknowledge their crimes through group therapy. The aim being to reduce the risk of re-offending by providing an environment where their attitudes and offending behaviour is constantly challenged.

Grendon has five wings of which G-Wing is a therapeutic community of thirty nine inmates convicted of offences of a very serious sexual nature. Inmates are selected because of their individual personality disorders or disruptive natures and live and work for up to two years in a very tight knit community.

It was 08.30am and, having gone through tight security, I joined the morning staff briefing in which they introduced themselves and explained what was involved in running a therapeutic community. I was joined after about 20 minutes by an inmate who was the Chairman of the Community, a position the inmates vote on and change every 3 months. The role of the Chairman is to run the community which is quite a demanding task; he runs the morning meetings, any votes that take place regarding decision making and importantly decides with the other inmates on the jobs that inmates are allocated. Every inmate has to justify how doing a job inside the prison will benefit them.

Following this, I accompanied the Chairman and the staff into a large room where for the first time I came face to face with thirty nine of the most dangerous sex offenders

in the country. I sat down and introduced myself and spoke about my recent series To Catch a Paedophile and my background as a former detective and now a leading authority in child protection.

After a series of short updates from inmates and announcements for the week, the inmates were invited to a voluntary questions session with me.

Once the morning meeting had finished, it was time for a cup of tea and an opportunity to talk to the staff about what they thought about chemical castration and Sarah's Law. This resulted in very clear and informed views that neither would work and should be not brought in.

Just before I returned to the main room for my informal questions session with the inmates, I asked the staff if there was anything I could not ask, I was told I could ask whatever I wanted.

Cautiously, I returned back into the main room where twenty nine of the thirty nine inmates had decided to attend the voluntary questions session.

I explained why I was at the prison and how I wanted to understand both the value of such a therapeutic community and its impact on re-offending and risk. I also stated I wanted to ask some very direct questions to hear the reasons why they committed the offences they had.

No sooner had I finished my introduction that the first inmate introduced himself by his first name, followed by; 'I sexually assaulted my partner's daughter who was 2 years old and then when I was confronted by my girlfriend about sexual abusing her, I killed her and her daughter.'

The next person introduced himself and then told me he started his sexual offending when he was 14 years old and sexually assaulted a number of strangers before he was caught as a result of a Crimewatch appeal. And that is how it went on until all twenty nine inmates had introduced themselves.

I was sitting in a room of child killers, paedophiles who had sexually abused their own children, step children, friend's children and total strangers, also inmates who had committed contact abuse offences and gone on the internet to download indecent images of children. In addition to child offenders a number of inmates had raped adult females, as well as one who had kidnapped an adult female with the intention of raping her and when her friends tried to rescue her he shot the two friends dead.

Surprisingly such was the value and power of the therapeutic community in policing itself that I was sitting alone in the room with no staff present and I felt totally safe, even though a number of the offenders' convictions related to extreme violence against adults.

With all the introductions completed, I then started asking question and, although not ignorant to the fact that some of the answers were not going to be totally honest,

after all, paedophiles are accomplished liars, I did feel that I was very likely to get the closest to the truth as was possible.

I asked how many thought they would get caught, the response was that everyone said they knew one day they would be caught. One offender said that every day that he drove home from work, he turned the corner of his road and looked toward his drive expecting to see a police car, another said he knew that DNA would catch him in the end.

I asked them if they felt guilty after the offending. A number of the inmates responded saying that the offending was like a drug and yes, immediately after the offence they did feel guilty, but this was immediately overtaken by the need for the next high. They related it to being addicted to drugs and the only way they could stop was by getting caught.

The next area we discussed was why they killed the children. I had three child killers in the room and for each offender the answer was simply because the children were about to, or were capable of telling someone. I found listening to someone who had taken the life of a child as chilling but vitally important for understanding why offenders kill.

Many of the inmates spoke about how they had suffered a poor family upbringing with low self worth, and although some had been sexually abused, most had not. Nearly all had either witnessed domestic violence, been bullied as a child, lacked parental interaction and had an addictive behaviour.

We also talked about the use of the internet to satisfy fantasies and the two online abusers who had collected large amount of sexual abuse images and videos against boys each stated that the internet afforded them access to every possible image and fantasy they had ever had. However, all the other offenders who had not used the internet as part of their offending were clear that they did not need the internet as the fantasies were in their head .

It was very clear that speaking to all the offenders that the planning that went into their offending was very calculated and in some cases all-consuming, leaving little or no time for anything else.

After an hour and a half of questions, it was time for the inmates to leave me and return back to the routine of the prison and its therapeutic community.

Having spent the morning with some of the most dangerous sex offenders, I can fully understand the hate and anger people have towards them and after hearing the gravity of their offences at times I was genuinely shocked and upset. But to simply cast them aside and ignore them would be to disregard the value that can be gained by working with them.

I believe that once a paedophile, always a paedophile. There is no cure, but what is possible is the ability through treatment to enable offenders to understand and control the desires they have by understanding what triggers their offending. This is

vital if the criminal justice system is going to have any effect of reducing re-offending and impact on child abuse.

Furthermore, I believe that by working and speaking with paedophiles, we can help to keep children safe, in the same way as you would ask a burglar what security you should have on your house. Let us work with paedophiles to gain the valuable knowledge as to why they select their targets and how we can make children less vulnerable.

The murder this week has far reaching implications for the prison service and Ministry of Justice especially given HMP Grendon's excellent safety record, but I hope that after a review the value and worth of Grendon is seen and it is supported. Grendon has a very vital role to play in the criminal justice system and I am certain that should it go this would have a significant impact on the safety of children.

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