AIMS For a better birth...

Security for Who?

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In December 1995, the new Chief Inspector of prisons, General Sir David Ramsbotham, took the unprecedented step of withdrawing his inspection team from Holloway prison.

This was because of "*over-zealous security, prisoners being locked in their cells 23 hours a day, poor health care, bullying, low staff morale, inadequate education and activities, and very dirty conditions*" (THE TIMES, 19 Dec. 1995)

This treatment relates to a woman, Ann, who was imprisoned for 18 months following a DSS fraud. She already had two children. These children were taken into care until the release of their father from prison who was serving a shorter sentence for the same fraud.

ANN'S EXPERIENCE

Ann had a history of problems with pregnancy. Nonetheless she was required to attend antenatal classes in handcuffs, despite representations from her husband and GP about the stress it may place on her and the impact it may have on her pregnancy.

Ann said that during one trip to hospital she suffered jibes from an escorting officer which she ignored. A little later she went to the bathroom to shower. First of all she was chained to the railings in the bathroom. Ann said she felt like a dog chained to a post. She was subsequently attached to a female escorting officer by a closeting chain. Ann told the Howard league that whilst she was washing, the female officer continually opened the door to check on her even though the only way out of the bathroom was through that door. Every time the door opened the other escorting officer, who was male, could also see into the bathroom.

Ann commented on this and the female officer is alleged to have come into the bathroom and grabbed Ann's hand. A fight was alleged to have followed which ended with Ann being fully restrained with an officer putting pressure on her back whilst she was laid on her stomach Ann told us several hospital staff witnessed what happened. Ann also received an injury to her ear which required medical treatment.

Shortly after it was discovered that Ann had a hole in her womb and therefore needed to be hospitalised. Throughout this period, Ann was cuffed to officers day and night which she said was extremely stressful and her blood pressure rose.

At 27 weeks Ann went into labour. The baby was 2 months premature but there were complications and the baby had an infection. Ann visited her daughter daily until the baby had to be rushed to a specialist

children's facility. Ann was escorted in cuffs to this hospital separately from her baby as the escorting officers would not allow her to accompany her child. Ann arrived at the hospital at 3.30pm, but at 3.45pm she was told that she would have to return to prison as the officers were due to go off duty. When her baby arrived at the hospital, medical staff were unable to operate as they were unable to obtain authorisation from Ann who had been taken back to prison. Eventually Ann was contacted and two prison staff volunteered to return to the hospital with her. Ann's baby died.

Following the alleged fight at the hospital, the officer filed a complaint against Ann. An adjudication followed and Ann lost her private cash for three weeks and had 21 days added to the length of her sentence.

Ann had also complained via the prison request/complaint process. Ann wanted to attend her child's funeral which was to take place at 11am. It is alleged that the van taking her to the funeral did not leave the prison until 11.15am. It has been suggested to the Howard League that this delay was deliberate. The priest delayed the service until Ann arrived. Ann attended the funeral handcuffed.

Because of the nature of Ann's Offence she was due to move to an open prison but since the incident with the prison officer, she has been regarded as a threat to prison officers and therefore unsuitable for open conditions. She is now in another closed women's prison.

Ann's problems were further compounded by the fact that the first prison did not allow her counselling to come to terms with the death of her baby and her current prison, just two months after the death of her baby, stopped her counselling. Ann told us that the prison said she was strong enough to cope.

The Howard League for Penal Reform