AIMS For a better birth...

A Civilised and Humane Society?

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Last August I spent a week at the Royal Free Hospital, Hampstead, after the birth of my daughter.

During my stay, I was in a ward next to a single room occupied by a woman prisoner from Holloway and a team of prison warders.

I was horrified to witness the treatment given out to this poor woman; for example, being attended by male prison warders, even during antenatal monitoring procedures.

Worst of all was the sight of this heavily pregnant woman, in her nightdress and slippers, being taken in chains over the very short distance from her room to the telephone next to the nurses' station, in order to make a telephone call in what was evidently her only outing of the day.

To see any human being manacled in this way is truly horrific, to see such barbaric practices forced on a pregnant woman defies belief in what is supposed to be a civilised and humane society. Indeed, the fact that this woman in chains was black and apparently African, could hardly fail to conjure up images of slavery and all the degradation that entailed.

How strange it is that in this country there is so much outrage and opposition to the compulsory muzzling of dangerous dogs any story of an animal kept in chains would no doubt provoke the usual public outcry - and yet we allow our fellow human beings at their most vulnerable to be treated in such a wretched fashion.

No woman in an advanced state of pregnancy is likely to venture very far, or indeed very fast, from the vigilance of adequately trained prison officer. I understand that no escapes of such women have ever taken place.

If experiments with tagging people on probation are being made, then surely a similarly discreet and dignified system could be used when absolutely necessary in cases of potentially dangerous prisoners.

No doubt the procedures I witnessed are within the Home Office guidelines, and are therefore perfectly acceptable to the likes of Ann Widdecornbe and Michael Howard; but then what does this tell us about them, their consciences and the sort of government they represent?

Theresa Musgrove
London