Summary of: What motivates dentists to work in prisons? A qualitative exploration

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FULL PAPER DETAILS

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Objective To explore what motivates dentists to work in prisons using Vroom's theoretical model of motivation as an explanatory framework. **Method** In-depth interviews were conducted with ten of the 15 dentists working in Scottish prisons. The focus was to explore their motivations to work in Scottish prisons. The data were analysed using a thematic framework based on the three motivational dimensions of expectancy, instrumentality and valence. **Results** The dentists had the skills to help improve their prisoner-patients' oral health but their efforts were often hindered by institutional rationing and the requirement to fit in with prison routines and procedures (expectancy). Despite these institutional difficulties the dentists experienced work rewards associated with the improvement in the prisoners' oral health (instrumentality). Finally, the dentists experienced a feeling of personal worth and a sense of commitment to providing care to Scottish prisoners (valence). **Conclusions** The dentists' motivation to work in Scottish prisons may be explained by Vroom's Expectancy Theory. The dentists' motivation is characterised by their beliefs that their work will improve clinical outcomes which will be rewarded by the satisfaction experienced when they overcome environmental obstacles and provide oral health care for their prisoner-patients.

EDITOR'S SUMMARY

This paper represents an opportunity to touch not for the first time and certainly not for the last on what I believe will become increasingly important aspects of our professional lives, if indeed we are to survive and prosper as a profession. These are the place of oral health within the context of a wider view of society, the requirement to address specific groups within society as much in terms of behavioural modification as in terms of traditional clinical treatment and the unquestioned adoption of a greater appreciation of qualitative and behavioural research.

That is a lot for a single paper to live up to but the context and the detail of this piece of work underpin all of these observations. Although, as with much qualitative research, the focus has by necessity to be localised, ie to prisons in Scotland, one suspects that the wider implications will be applicable to other countries and jurisdictions. Addition-

ally, in Scotland and in the UK generally we are probably more advanced in our oral health provision and investigation in prisons than many other countries, certainly in the western world. While this should in no way make us smug or lead us to assume that all is well, it does enable us to take a wider view and if we as yet do not have all the answers, at least we have started to ask the questions and address the problems.

Professional satisfaction is of major importance and of prime motivation in our choice of career and although in a very specific area indeed, this paper reinforces this view with an overwhelming clarity. The choice of working in a prison environment may be made for a variety of reasons, some of which as indicated here might be for avoiding other healthcare delivery systems rather than opting for prison as a 'positive' option. However, the result is a fascinating one and I hope that the publication of this paper is another important step

along the way in the improvement of oral health and of professional health.

The full paper can be accessed from the *BDJ* website (www.bdj.co.uk), under 'Research' in the table of contents for Volume 211 issue 4.

Stephen Hancocks

Editor-in-Chief

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IN BRIEF

- The adoption of responsibility by NHS Scotland for prisoners' healthcare from the Scottish Prison Service has begun.
- It is important to understand what motivates dentists to work in Scottish prisons so that the future provision of care to prisoners can be optimised.
- Dentists were motivated by the belief that despite the difficulties of the environment, their efforts would improve their prisoner-patients' oral health.

COMMENTARY

The oral health of adults living in the UK varies considerably according to social class and area of residence, but overall there have been remarkable improvements in the dental status of most individuals over the last 40 years. However the prison population has levels of disease more akin to the 1950s, with extractions and dentures being the most common clinical requirements. Attempts to implement preventive care have for the most part been thwarted by a highly mobile prison population, administrative issues and the fractured mental health of many of the inmates. Indeed it is possibly the individuals who have committed the worst crimes who receive the best dental care. They are consigned to one prison for a long time and ongoing assessment and treatment is possible.

The literature on prison dental care is somewhat sparse and the authors of this paper have not only given readers an insight into the feelings of prison dentists but also highlighted the ponderous and unpredictable nature of working within the Scottish prison system. Dentists in primary care practise are for the most part outside the main NHS management systems and therefore have to concentrate on organising and administering their own practices. Smith *et al.*'s paper presents a very different scenario for prison dentists. Once established in the prison dental system they are insulated from the stresses of running an NHS practice and feel a sense of relief.

It is interesting to note how the norms and values of both the prison staff and the prisoners are so different to those of

middle class health professionals. For example the paper reports how the dentists are concerned that they are unable to prescribe dental floss because it could be used as a weapon. It is chilling to reflect that a human being would garotte another individual with such a mundane 'piece of string'. A more valuable piece of preventive equipment is the toothbrush, but it too can become a potential knife when the handle is carved to a point, hence many prisons provide brushes with tiny handles. No wonder periodontal problems are rife in prisons!

This paper is also a window on academic research not normally seen or read by dental professionals. The use of behavioural science theoretical models enables researchers to investigate complex issues in more detail and depth than can be achieved with the ubiquitous self-complete questionnaire. It is fascinating to read that the prison dentists may have chosen a job because it took them away from the stressful melee of NHS general practise. However, over time their feelings for the prisoners and their oral health played a much more important part in the assessments of the value of their working lives. This change over time could be very helpful when explaining career choices to final year undergraduates.

May I urge all the dental team to read this well-written and interesting paper, as it provides a unique insight into how the dental profession functions in a difficult, almost alien environment.

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AUTHOR QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**1. Why did you undertake this research?**

In 2005 the then Scottish Executive launched *An action plan for improving oral health and modernising NHS dental services in Scotland*. This policy document recognised the importance of oral health promotion, including to those who were described as priority groups such as Scottish prisoners. As a first step in the development of an oral health improvement programme, dentists working in the prison sector were contacted to gain an understanding of the challenges and motivations with regard to prison working.

2. What would you like to do next in this area to follow on from this work?

The next stage in this programme of research is to conduct qualitative work with prisoner groups and those working in the prisons in order to appreciate the difficulties encountered by them when promoting oral health in a secure environment. An understanding of the felt and expressed needs of these priority group patients will enable the development of tailored intervention for oral health promotion for prisoners in Scotland.