

John Swinney went off to prison this week. No, not another scandal, he went to meet the people we were locking up and the people looking after them and to try to work out what was going wrong. He was quite sure that there were a lot of people in prison who shouldn't be there at all, and I agree with him.

It brought to mind a story I heard about a woman prisoner who committed suicide in prison before Christmas, and endless stories I have heard from police officers about handling people with mental health problems.

First, let's consider diabetics. Stick with me - I promise this will all come together.

There are thousands of people in this country diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. It's something you are born with. Maybe there's a hereditary link, maybe there's a genetic cause. I don't know, but what I do know is; 1. Diabetes is a chronic condition (i.e. you are stuck with it for life), and 2. You can generally live perfectly normally as long as you take care of yourself and take the appropriate medicine. Now, sometimes diabetics don't do this. Maybe they eat something that they shouldn't, or they try to manage without their medication. Maybe they have a drink problem, or take drugs. Sometimes, they have family or friends that help to look after them, sometimes they don't. Sometimes they might be unlucky and something untoward happens, through no fault of their own. Whatever the reason, if their condition worsens, and they end up in an emergency situation, they will be taken into hospital, and given whatever treatment is needed to make them well again. You might judge them if they 'made' themselves ill, but you would not deny them treatment, and would do whatever was in your power to help them avoid another crisis.

Now, let's consider schizophrenia. Again, we are not really sure what causes the condition. Again, it is a chronic condition that will never go away.

Again, sufferers can live perfectly normal lives with the right combination of drugs and looking after themselves. Again, if you drink or take drugs, you are not helping yourself. Again, sufferers may or may not have family and friends looking out for them. Again, they may just be plain unlucky, and end up in an emergency situation. But this time it can all be quite different.

Some of you will be old enough to remember asylums. Men and women were locked up there for the protection to them and others. Children would frighten each other with tales of what happened behind the high walls.

Then there was a move towards more enlightened care. People were treated with dignity, and recognised as being ill, and in need of care, rather than just mad and needing to be locked away. Of course, it wasn't perfect, but it was a great improvement on what was provided before. Care workers became specialists in their field, and many people were given a chance instead of being given up on.

Then someone had a bright idea about 'care in the community'. People with mental health problems would be able to live with their family, or independently, rather than being shut away in a hospital or care home.

The reality was that the people most able to care for them just could not cope. Families never received the help they needed to cope, and care workers were hopelessly under-resourced. Twenty-four hour care was simply not available, so a crisis at the weekend, or late at night meant the burden falling on the only people who available 24/7, police officers. Now, the police may have their faults, but if you are looking to remove someone who is aggressive, abusive or just out of their head, they are the only port of call. Take someone like that to A&E and you will soon be joined by the boys in blue. They are trained to 'remove them to a place of safety'. This might be a cell, but only if they have

reason to believe a crime has been committed. If they do not think this, but have reason to believe they have a mental health problem, and that releasing them may endanger someone (including the person in their care), then they are supposed to seek advice from a doctor. Try that at 2 am on a Saturday morning. I have heard of more than one instance of police officers driving around all night with someone in the back of their police car, waiting until a nurse, or a social worker came on duty, so that the person could be given the care they need.

Which brings me to the woman who killed herself. She had been on remand for four months (i.e. had been charged, but not tried for a crime) for arson, a crime where no-one but herself had been in danger. In that time she had tried to hurt herself 90 times, increasingly so after her son was placed for adoption. She tried to seek help on the very day that she died.

By all means lock up the real criminals, to keep us safe, and to try and steer them on the right route, but for pity's sake we need to be properly looking after vulnerable people who have real illnesses. I hope John Swinney bears this in mind as he tries to tackle the prison over-crowding, and that he learns from the mistakes of the who came before him

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