The RANZCP Faculty of Forensic Psychiatry Victorian Subcommittee welcomed

Dr David Thomas

Presenting an educational lecture on

Autism & Offending: Forensic Considerations

People with autism spectrum conditions (ASCs) have long been considered vulnerable to engaging in serious offending behaviours including physical assaults, criminal damage, stalking, rapes, homicides and fire setting. This view appears consistent with some published reports of increased prevalence of ASCs in offender populations in both correctional and secure health facilities. Individuals on the spectrum who engage in serious violent crime typically present with a range of complex needs that cannot be effectively or adequately managed in mainstream health and correctional settings. It is well recognised that features of autism often create barriers to effective therapeutic engagement and the response rates to treatment programs are lower in this group than those in the general offender population.

Media coverage of serious or rare criminal offences involving autistic offenders is very often misleading and unduly sensational. Cases such as those of the British hacker Gary McKinnon, the Sandy Hook school shooter Adam Lanza and more recently and locally, Eurydice Dixon’s killer Jaymes Todd have sparked furious debates as to the presence and nature of any links between autism spectrum conditions and serious violent offending and the appropriateness, or otherwise, of judicial outcomes for these individuals.

In this session I intend to provide a brief overview of autism spectrum conditions and address diagnostic conundrums that clinicians often face; review the current evidence base on the links, if any, between ASCs and serious offending behaviours and the treatments and interventions designed to address risk needs. I also hope to explore and address some commonly asked questions including motivation for offending, links with psychopathy and schizophrenia spectrum disorders and also deal with the issue of comorbid conditions. I also hope to address pertinent issues that forensic psychiatrists need to consider and address in providing expert evidence to the courts including issues of causal and contributory factors, risk mitigation, treatability and Verdins considerations.

About Dr David Thomas

David is a consultant psychiatrist with the Victorian Institute for Forensic Mental Health (Forensicare) and Hon Research Fellow with the Centre for Forensic Behavioural Science, Swinburne University of Technology.

He trained in London and has worked as a consultant in intellectual Disability since 2001. Between 2001 and 2007 he was the autism lead across the 4 boroughs of North East London, set up autism-specific services across North and North East London and developed and delivered autism-focused training to the Metropolitan Police. After undertaking additional training in Forensic Psychiatry, he moved to the East London NHS Foundation trust where he helped set up a new medium secure service for people with intellectual disabilities.

In 2011 he was appointed Clinical Director of Cedar House Hospital, a forensic hospital in Kent for individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders and in 2014 was appointed Medical Director of the Adult Mental Health and Intellectual Disability division of Four Seasons Healthcare, with responsibility for 6 medium and low secure hospitals, 2 step-down secure rehabilitation units and 4 community-based recovery hospitals. He moved to Melbourne in 2017 and has worked primarily in Forensicare’s prison directorate. He is the lead psychiatrist at Ravenhall Correctional Centre and the consulting psychiatrist to the state-wide Community Forensic Disability Mental Health Service.

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