

JRS (Malta)'s concerns on medical care in detention centres

The following are our main concerns regarding the present health care situation in the detention centres:

1. **The present detention policy itself**, the excessive length of detention and the way it is organized are themselves a cause of serious harm to the psychological and physical well being of detainees. The recently published CPT (European Committee for the Prevention of Torture) 2005 Report ¹ echoes this concern in its paragraph 39, where it speaks of ‘the detrimental impact on the physical and psychological state of health of detained foreign nationals of the various factors already identified in January 2004 (poor – if not very poor – conditions of detention, total lack of activities, no adequate information on their situation, etc). Unsurprisingly, many of the problems noted were of a psychosomatic nature. In addition, the accumulation of such factors was conducive to the development of reactive disorders’.
2. **The present living conditions** are another major source of concern: the overcrowding, the lack of suitable sanitary facilities, the lack of the most basic furniture like chairs and tables in a number of detention centres, the fact that hundreds of persons live in tents all the year round, while others, including children, have only two hours of access to the fresh air every week. We would like to highlight the fact of the detention of single women with single men, children and families in the same overcrowded corridors: we point this out because until a few years ago women were detained separately from men, yet this is no longer the case. The present arrangement has the potential to cause severe problems of sexual harassment and sexual or gender based violence.
3. There is no doubt that the **new medical service** introduced last April is a significant improvement on the previous situation, both in quantity and quality. Detainees are much happier with the new service, and the general comments are very favourable. Yet, much more is required to offer an adequate service. While the number of medical consultations on the primary level and the physical presence of a doctor and a nurse have certainly increased, there are still many gaps, and the problems of identifying those who need medical attention, access to hospital, keeping appointments with specialists and other specialized services, follow ups, and the giving out of treatment prescribed by the doctors, still remain.
4. Government policy states that **vulnerable persons** shall not be detained. This is commendable, but in practice there is still much to be done. In the case of detainees who belong to clearly identifiable categories of vulnerables, like babies, children or pregnant women, their release from detention still takes too long in the circumstances (they are given no special treatment during their detention) even though now things are moving faster. The problems are more severe in the case of other vulnerable categories - people with chronic illnesses, like diabetes or high blood pressure, and those with mental health problems; these persons often spend unacceptably long periods in detention until their vulnerable status is established and they obtain freedom. Not only does this create unnecessary hardship on many levels, but it also means deteriorating health and more difficult access to care.
5. The situation of **mental health care** is the last in our list of concerns, but it is certainly not the least! There is no provision of any mental health service in detention, even though it is obvious that detention and its accompanying uncertainty, even in the best of conditions, creates high levels of stress, anxiety, sleeplessness. This is exacerbated by the fact that many detainees have been through traumatic experiences on their way here. Yet there is no psychiatric nurse, much less a psychiatrist, who visit the detention centres regularly. The conditions in the ward reserved for immigrants at Mount Carmel hospital leaves a lot to be desired; inmates are locked up all day with nothing to do and with hardly any access to the fresh air.

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¹ http://www.jrsmalta.org/CPT_2005_report.pdf.

See also the Maltese Government's reply at http://www.jrsmalta.org/CPT_2005_Gov_reply.pdf