

You are visiting the website of

MICHAEL HEAP

[Return to Home Page](#)

[Return to List of Articles](#)

THE NEED TO BE SEEN TO BE DOING SOMETHING

This paper first appeared in the Summer 2018 issue of the 'Skeptical Intelligencer' pp 2-3.

In June 2017 the UK Ministry of Justice published an evaluation of the Core Sex Offender Treatment Programme (SOTP) in England and Wales. The core SOTP is a CBT (cognitive behaviour therapy) intervention designed by HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) for prisoners who have committed sexual offences. It was accredited for use in prisons in 1992 (*note 1*). The conclusions of this cautious and balanced report were that offenders participating in the programme were no less likely to be reconvicted for a sexual offence (average post-release period 8.2 years) than a matched untreated group and there was some indication that they were *more likely* to be so.

Prior to the report, intermittent evaluations of the programme published in the UK and North America had presented a mixed picture. This was very likely due to the difficulties inherent in matching treated and untreated groups, as well as the problems of 'deniers' (convicted persons who maintain their innocence) and drop-outs, which are almost inevitable in inmates undertaking the programme.

In view of the findings, in March 2017 the Ministry of Justice announced the replacement of existing SOTP programmes with two new programmes, Kaizen (for high risk, high need, high priority offenders) and Horizon (for medium risk offenders). These programmes incorporate the targeting of areas of concern that were not addressed in the original programmes.

Given the history of our prison service and the way offenders have been dealt with by the criminal justice system in the past, surely we can only applaud the fact that in more recent times there have been serious efforts, grounded in a rational understanding of offending behaviour, to rehabilitate convicted criminals and dissuade them from their errant ways. But caution is always in order. A while back, Matt Ridley in his *Times* column (9.10.17) devoted his attention to something called 'virtue signalling', which is when we make some sort of statement or gesture intended to display us in a good light but otherwise having no beneficial effect on the world. He quoted the economist Milton Friedman: 'One of the great mistakes is to judge policies and programmes by their intentions rather than their results'. For example, well-meaning politicians may gain approval by supporting or enacting a policy that has the clear *intention* of helping poor people improve their lives even though in practice it has no such *effect* and may even be counter-productive. Obviously one remedy for this is adopting, when possible, evidence-based policies; yet like the rest of us, politicians seem disinclined to learn from the past.

The SOTP evaluation arrived just in time for its inclusion in a readable paperback by Dr Robert A. Forde entitled *Bad Psychology: How Forensic Psychology Left Science Behind*. The author is a veteran UK forensic psychologist who in 2014 completed a PhD on parole board decision-making for prisoners serving life sentences (*note 2*). In his book he bemoans what he sees as the readiness of forensic psychologists to apply methods and practices, particularly in the fields of treatment and risk assessment, that either have no convincing evidence base or have been discredited by what evidence there is. My own experience likewise tells me that too often it is intention rather than effect that dictates decisions and practices.

Here's one example. I was once asked to write an independent psychologist's report on 'Tom', an inmate serving a life sentence, in preparation for a parole board hearing at which his transfer to an open prison was being considered. His move was opposed by two members of the prison staff who believed that he should remain in jail and undergo a Healthy Relationships Programme. This was based on CBT principles and would be 'delivered', as we now say, in a series of classes with other prisoners. Tom had been incarcerated for 12 years and had undertaken numerous CBT courses with various titles, to the point where he was complaining that he had long been able to put into practice the useful things that he had learned, and subsequent courses were mainly repetitions of things he had already been taught. Indeed I rather feared that he knew more about CBT than I did. I and another member of the parole board questioned whether, notwithstanding the efforts of the teachers on this course, it made any sense to keep Tom in a closed prison for another 18 months if the sole purpose was for him to learn how to enjoy close friendships and intimate relationships. It seemed rather like teaching someone how to swim without their being immersed in water. Surely it would be more sensible for him to experience making acquaintances and

friends in the natural way, something that being in an open prison would afford him the opportunity to do? Moreover, no evidence was available at that time on the efficacy of the course.

Maybe some of this criticism and that targeted at the core SOTP is unfair. If we are to insist that offender treatments *are* evidence-based then we first have to run the programmes in order to gather the evidence (though in the case of Tom it was unacceptable that, now being eligible for open conditions, and even his release, this was delayed by his having to undertake an untested treatment). However, we have good grounds for being somewhat skeptical about these kinds of courses. Surely there are limits to what can be achieved by efforts intended to change a person's well-ingrained attitudes and behaviour by verbal instruction in a classroom setting, particularly within the restrictive and toxic environment of a prison? And are there not limits to the extent that any changes that *are* achieved can endure when the inmate returns to life on the outside?

By all means let those entrusted with this task do their best to find out what, if anything, is possible. But maybe there will come a point when it makes more sense for the resources to be reallocated to a different kind of approach.

Notes

1. At <http://tinyurl.com/y9yh5geh>
2. At <http://etheses.bham.ac.uk/5476/>