

The sickening details of why and how the prisoners are dying

by Dr. B. Cayenne Bird

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On a daily basis for more than seven years I have been alerting other journalists and the legislators that the prisoners are dying preventable deaths. We have nineteen families in our UNION group who have lost a son or daughter to the unbearable callousness and incompetence of the prison bureaucracy.

When we were simply begging for help to prevent some of these deaths, medical neglect wasn't a topic that anyone wanted to recognize, let alone remedy. But when we were able to find lawyers to file six lawsuits in the past year, then and only then, did reform become a higher priority.

Headlines in the major newspapers the past two days state that a prison healthcare emergency exists in general terms. But since I know the specifics surrounding a number of the prisoner deaths, I feel compelled to share the systemic dysfunction that just never seems to make it to public view let alone get corrected.

The crisis exists in part due to the short staffing problems and poor salaries.

The number one reason that the prisoners are dying preventable deaths is that there are too many people in prison. Due to ridiculous harsh laws against non violent people, the overcrowding reached inhumane levels about three years ago but it's such a large industry that nobody wants to address an immediate release of non violent prisoners, which is exactly what is in order and what other states have done in response to similar problems.

The physical conditions have turned prisons into disease incubators. There aren't enough doctors and nurses who could bear to witness and work in such an environment. Numerous medical workers have told me they would never participate in such gross inhumanity and squalor as it exists now in most prisons statewide.

Even the Women's prisons, designed for four have as many as ten females jammed into one space. If one gets sick, they all get infected. The men are living in day rooms and gymnasiums with bunks 18" part stacked three high. There are only a few toilets for hundreds of men, a horrible recipe for people with the diarrhea common with Hepatitis and other diseases.

Here's how a few prisoners have died in cases that I know well.

At California State Prison Solano, Anthony Shumake died of a dental infection which was neglected for too long. Apparently, CDC hadn't been paying their bills and the ambulance driver was forced to drive him to a hospital located hours away from the prison. In this day and age, a healthy young man dying from a dental infection is an outrage. But it happened. It is not unusual for ambulances to take up to two hours to arrive. On the week ends ambulances aren't called at all for prisoners who don't have the money to pay for them, which would include the majority of inmates. A helicopter always comes to transport the guards when they are hurt, but not the inmates. The prison clinics have no defibrillators and very little else in the way of equipment to save lives.

Also at CSP Solano, Ersel Ware, a man in his 50's fell down on the handball court on a hot day. Another prisoner who was experienced in giving CPR tried to help him but the guards ordered him away at gunpoint.

You see, most of the guards themselves are not trained in basic first aid or CPR and if a prisoner falls to the ground, he is simply left there to die until help shows up. This typically takes at least 1/2 hour but can take up to two hours. By that time, the prisoner is dead. The emergency response policies differ from prison to prison but one thing they all have in common is that they are primitive. With the salaries the guards are paid, it should be mandated that they not only have CPR and basic first aid training but that they use these skills when a prisoner falls instead of just watching them die with no assistance.

California Medical Facility, Vacaville is located next door to CSP Solano and is touted as one of the two hospitals for prisoners in the State. Donald Swisher, a young 34 year old mentally ill prisoner died there of simple pneumonia because nobody would listen to either him or his cellmate about the black mucous that he was coughing up. Donald Swisher died because nobody cared and all the desperate pleas for help fell on deaf ears. Imagine a healthy young man, except for brain damage he sustained during an accident, dying of simple pneumonia in 2004. He leaves behind a mother and five little children who will never forget this grave injustice. The mentally ill are almost never taken seriously or respected enough to get medical care when they ask for it throughout the "system"

There have been multiple deaths such as Harvey Cuffs who went to the prison medical clinic at CMF Vacaville several times asking for emergency help but are turned away after being told that it takes at least two weeks to be seen by a doctor. Harvey cuffs was gravely ill and should not have been in prison in the first place, let alone left to die alone on the cold concrete floor of a prison cell. But that is what happened. The Reporter wrote about it but nothing has improved at CMF Vacaville despite the lawsuits and multiple stories about preventable deaths. I am aware of this scenario of being denied emergency care which predictably results in death numerous times.

At least half the prisoners have a life threatening illness such as Hepatitis, AIDS or TB and yet almost nothing is being done to prevent the spread of these diseases. The prisoners are not given disinfectant with which to clean their filthy cells outside of a couple of teaspoons of scrubbing powder each week. Can't have that, the prisoners having disinfectant, they might hurt the guards with it. But what the filth combined with the overcrowding hurts is the prisoners. Even the kitchens often have no paper towels or disinfectant, no soap in the restrooms and the prisoners who serve food are not carefully screened for TB or Hepatitis.

The laundry comes back smelling of urine because it is urine. The washers and dryers are so overcramped that the sheets and towels do not get washed clean. Mixing the laundry of very sick prisoners is a very stupid thing to do in the first place but not to properly wash and dry their clothing spreads disease.

There is almost no preventive health care administered in prisons. Take a look at their diets. The budget of \$2.42 per day per prisoner hasn't been raised in 15 years and includes almost no citrus or other fresh foods. Everyday for lunch, prisoners get a high fat mystery meat sandwich IF they are well enough to walk to breakfast to pick it up. If they can't make it to the cafeteria because they are too ill, then nobody feeds them unless the other prisoners bring them scraps of food. The doctors do not make cell visits.

I would not put it past CDCR to feed the prisoners infected animals if they can save a buck on prisoner's food costs and I am concerned. CDCR claims that citrus isn't given to the prisoners because they can make liquor called ?pruno? with it but the fact is that a packet of catsup can help brew pruno. Almost anything can be made into alcohol so that is a poor and unacceptable excuse! Scurvy is a predictable result of getting no citrus and this practice is unhealthy. Vitamins are never administered to replace the denied food items.

There are no special high protein diets for diabetics. Inmate Mark Grangetto is being starved and denied the high calorie diet that he needs. His weight is slightly under 100 lbs on a frame of 5'8" from this starvation. At one time this past summer, a doctor ordered a 3500 calorie-per-day diet and special nutrition packs to be

given to him throughout the day. For a couple of days he received the feedings then they stopped. There has been nothing his mother can do to get her dying son properly fed. This failure to obey doctors orders is more the rule than the exception throughout the system.

Grangetto's mother has had no choice but to file a lawsuit after appealing to Senators, the useless Inspector General, Ombudsmen who are powerless to help her. Even writing to the warden and chief medical officer has resulted in nothing but having her son put in his wheelchair, taken to the shower and beaten up by a guard at Corcoran State Prison for complaining. That's how the guards handle prisoners who complain about medical problems ? they beat them up, verbally abuse them, tear up their 602's. Nobody cares or does anything about it.

Grangetto, though gravely ill with diabetes and hepatitis was cast without a wheelchair into the SHU (isolated Security Housing Units) this summer in retaliation for his mother filing a lawsuit and he nearly died there until we threatened to picket the prison and he was briefly hospitalized.

The atrocities of medical neglect and outright abuse that Mark Grangetto has suffered at several prisons is well documented and this lawsuit will be a real eye-opener for the public. But it won't save Mark. His life expectancy is short due to a long pattern of medical neglect that is slowly killing him.

Diabetics in prison are all suffering, not being properly fed and the damage that out of control blood sugar does to their bodies over the course of time is deadly. But nobody cares enough to actually start feeding them properly, giving them medications on a regular schedule and helping them heal.

At Salinas Valley Prison there is a gross case of medical neglect that has been going on for 18 months that I know about, probably much longer. Inmate Randy Baker has seven very painful kidney stones. Three of them are the size of a golf ball. This is a medical emergency but repeated appeals to Senators Spieir and Perata, Charles D'Arcy of the Inspector General's Office (a former prosecutor) , Dr. Rene Kanan, Internal Affairs, all the many wardens at Salinas Valley the past 18 months and Dr. Lee have still produced no surgery. You see, a surgery costs money. And the money is at the root of why there is no medical care available for prisoners like Randy Baker. They sent him for tests and approved the surgery more than a year ago. But instead of spending the money to ease his suffering, they just keep sending him for tests. It's a game. A very inhumane and deadly game.

Luckily, Randy Baker's parents have the financial resources to file a lawsuit and have carefully documented everything but that won't save his life. His pain is so intense that he states he has no quality of life and he wants to give up. His elderly parents are worried sick and the strain has nearly killed them too. Still they have no place to go for help.

Often times the prisoners die because the guards kill them or set up other inmates to kill them for a small payoff. Careless double-celling that will predictably result in death has done just that on multiple occasions at Lancaster, CMF Vacaville, Pleasant Valley, CSP Solano and many other prisons. I believe this is a form of medical neglect and that the wardens and guards who engage in this type of murder should be prosecuted. While we made some strides this year that the Inspector General found Warden Michael Harrison for carelessly double-celling Eddie Arraiga in Lancaster's ad seg responsible for his death, we have yet to see any criminal charges filed over it. Eddie Arraiga's screams were heard by all the inmates for more than one hour but no guard ever came to save him. Harrison is still the warden at Lancaster so this type of murder of prisoners doesn't seem to be too important. When will the prison administrators be held accountable?

Anthony Brown's autopsy report speaks for itself. He was a very health inmate with bipolar disease in prison for ramming his car into the back of man's car who owed him money. No one was hurt. One day at

California Men's Colony he became very cold and they had been denying him the two blankets required by the regulations. So he took one blanket out of a female guard's hands. Well here comes five guards, beating and choking him and they put a spit mask over his head. Then they sprayed pepper spray down his throat until his heart stopped beating. This type of murder by the guards happened at Lancaster as well. The spit mask acts similar to a paper bag. There was supposedly an investigation into it where all the guards were cleared but none of the medical workers and prisoners who witnessed it were even interviewed. The guards killed him and nobody cared.

Warden James Yates of Pleasant Valley Prison ignored the pleas of a one-armed prisoner double-celled with a severely mentally ill inmate who had killed his last cellmate too. Even after begging and alerting the guards that he expected to be killed, Yates still ignored him and the prisoner died. Who is holding Yates and his bully guards responsible for this callousness besides God? Why isn't he being prosecuted?

There is no accountability for these acts of murder.

Callousness and deliberate indifference is against the law but not to a bureaucrat, especially those working in the prisons. The prisoners are regarded as slaves whose lives have little or no value once they cannot work for 9 cents an hour. When they die it is a non event. Their families may be dead or not know how to get together and organize to give them voice or stand up for them. Many prisoners are former foster children so they have no family who will fight for them, for their rights, for their abuses.

The legislators all know about the medical crisis. They get tens of thousands of letters from the 3 million voters related to a state prisoner (not including those in jails and juvenile halls) They claim that if they actually read and opened this mail there wouldn't be time to do anything else. After all, families of prisoners are not a formal voting group like say the CCPOA or the nurses or teachers who write big checks.

The Inspector General Matthew Cate and his staff know when a death is coming but instead of taking action to save the life of the person pleading for help, they send back a form letter stating that they get too much mail.

When a prisoner is dying the most he or she can expect is a form letter stating that no help is available. That really sucks eggs from a humanitarian standpoint but it also causes millions in lawsuit payouts for deliberate indifference which outrage every taxpayer.

We had a call-in for a number of problems including medical neglect to Roderick Hickman, the man at the top in charge of all prisons just last week. We figured that maybe Mr. Hickman needed to know we are upset about all this suffering and dying and other forms of abuse by the guards and wardens under his management.

Five of the wives and mothers who called in are not allowed to visit their loved one in the prison hospital. No American should ever have to endure this type of sick worry but it is happening to them and hundreds of others. Stamps and writing paper are unavailable to the inmates, even if they were strong enough to write so that their families may know whether or not they dead or alive. What the hell is going on here! Can there be anything more cruel than this? Cruel to the prisoners and even crueler to the family members who can't work or think about anything else besides whether or not their loved one is surviving.

What was Hickman's response to all these desperate family members? He put an answering machine on one of the numbers. Some of his staff told the family members they were lying. They gave out phone numbers of fictitious people to call for help including the broadcast host Jenny Jones. The people calling in were not your typical functionally illiterate relatives of prisoners. They were doctors, teachers, nurses, social workers,

administrative assistants, pastors and others who have a prisoner in their families. Yet they were treated by Hickman and his staff as if their desperate complaints were lies and totally unimportant. That is why these same people are loading up their cars to picket his office on Dec 2 from 10 am until they drop, to draw media attention to this callousness. (1515 "S" Street, Sacramento Please Join Us because this should never happen in America)

I have witnessed several cases of unauthorized cremations, fought for dead bodies to be released to their families for ten days or more, and discovered at least one funeral home that never even opens the body bag to check the extent of the injuries before cremating the body. Most of the families of prisoners are poor, many are elderly and cremation is their only option since the state will not ship a body to the family. Two prisoners wrote to us expecting that the guards were going to kill them. We reported both predictable tragedies but nothing was done and sure enough, both prisoners ended up dead. One was classified as ? natural causes? and the other was called a suicide. The Warden at that time Michael Knowles said John Bolander hung himself in ad seg with a t-shirt after he wrote us that he expected to be killed.

Now we have a flu epidemic coming. With half the prisoners infected with other epidemics raging out of control in the prisons, it is likely they cannot all be vaccinated due to their lowered immune systems and weakened conditions due to a poor diet and no medical care. That is if they would even be offered vaccine at all.

Dr. Rene Kanan has been firing doctors and not replacing them even though there are temporary agencies that she could be doing this with so if the flu wipes out half the prisoners, look to her as one of the key people responsible. She has no emergency procedures in place at the prisons in the event of any natural disaster even if there were enough doctors and nurses with decent salaries. Four major riots haven't been handled well at all these past few months.

I placed a print-out about the possibility of the avian flu pandemic in everyone's hands who was a key decision maker at Judge Henderson's hearing this summer when it was just a blip on the radar screen as a possibility. I suggested as I handed out the article from a major medical journal that the non-violent prisoners need to be released immediately as well as those who qualify for compassionate release.

I pointed out that the lawsuits that would follow because people are housed in gyms and day rooms where humans shouldn't be placed to live due to vulnerable air-borne diseases would topple the state should such a pandemic get loose in the prisons.

Release? Nobody would even discuss it besides Donald Specter who agreed with me. But it was one brief statement in all the long days of a trial. Nobody in a position of authority is thinking about release, only of hiring more doctors and nurses and other medical staff.

The core problem of inhumane conditions and severe overcrowding isn't being addressed. The doctors and nurses surely deserve more compensation but that is only one small part of the big problem.

I plan to personally stand out in the wind and rain, whatever the weather, with a protest sign on Dec 2, 2005 with as many people as I can call to stand with me and stand up for prisoners who cannot fight for themselves outside Roderick Hickman's office.

He is the man at the top. The buck stops there. I will be at 1515 "S" Street in Sacramento on Friday Dec 2 from 10 am until I drop because I am outraged over these preventable deaths of people who did not have a death sentence. In fact most of them were in prison over a minor crime.

Nobody should be in a California bloodhouse over a minor crime because any sentence to them is a potential death sentence in a health care emergency as great as the one where we find ourselves.

The over-crowding is the 800 lb elephant in the room that nobody wants to talk about. I am going to talk about it and ask others to join me in doing so right now before any more prisoners die.

All of this inhumanity, none of it is an actual solution to crime. The murder of people's family members is taking place in your name with your tax dollars.

Please come and stand with the mothers and other family members whose loved ones are dead or dying so that we can be viewed as real people. The animal rights people wouldn't let this treatment happen to a chicken why are prisoners worth less?

The prisoners are rioting, committing suicides and hunger striking all over California because they think no one cares about them and the retaliation is great if they file a bogus 602 form asking for help. They cannot fight for themselves so who will stand up for them if not their families many of whom do not own cars?

Someone will listen if a large enough crowd shows up at Hickman's offices. The news media has already alerted the voters that the crisis is an emergency but it takes so much more to get the remedies in place.

The flyer for the event is located here. We have a number of mismanagement issues but medical neglect is the most pressing one. Every winter most of the whole state goes on vacation and the prisoners are left to die. We can do something about that, can we not? It goes without saying that everyone with a loved one in prison needs to there to avert even more disaster. Had the people most hurt had the skills to organize and elect people to office who cared about them, none of this overcrowding and inhumanity could exist.

The public safety is threatened and as citizens we need to be heard or accept the consequences that deadly silence brings

http://www.1union1.com/Dec_2_Rod_Hickman.htm

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