

Rethinking COVID-19 Outbreak Management Behind Bars

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Background/Purpose:

The Justice Health and Forensic Mental Health Network (the Network) has experienced a surge in COVID-19 cases in custody consistent with the community. Aligned with NSW Health strategy, outbreak management was designed to eliminate COVID-19 from correctional facilities. This approach was effective in controlling outbreaks in custody during the Delta wave however the emergence of Omicron and scale back of public health restrictions across NSW has seen an increase in custody acquired cases. This has prompted the need to re-assess the current isolation procedures and the development of a modified isolation model.

Approach:

The Network developed a modified COVID-19 isolation protocol to support outbreak management in NSW correctional centres. The governing principle of the protocol allows greater flexibility for isolation management while continuing to reduce and contain COVID-19 transmission. The modified isolation protocol provides guidance for staff to manage outbreaks in prison. This involves healthcare staff identifying people vulnerable to serious COVID-19 illness and arranging their accommodation outside of the outbreak zone. With consent and risk mitigation, the remaining people identified in the outbreak can leave their cell and access communal areas and amenities not available in their cell, however they are restricted to their accommodation area.

Outcomes/Impact:

The development and implementation of this model has allowed people in custody greater flexibility and has reduced the detrimental effects of traditional outbreak management by removing the requirement to isolate in their cell. This has also decreased the risk of violence in custodial facilities and removed many of the disruptions to healthcare and custodial operations caused by the pandemic.

Innovation and Significance:

The change to outbreak management is significant as the protocol has been developed in response to a unique setting while recognising the changes to isolation requirements in the community whilst also taking into account the vulnerable population and comorbidities of the prison population.

Disclosure of Interest Statement

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