

MENTAL HEALTH

Condition of prisoner care in question

BEING locked up in prison is bad for mental health and likely to exacerbate pre-existing conditions, according to Peter Mason, of the Centre for Public Innovation, which works to improve performance in the public sector.

The statistics would appear to support him, too. **Health Service Journal** (Nov 17) says 80 per cent of prisoners suffer from mental health problems.

Next year, responsibility for prison healthcare is to be transferred to the NHS. But, reports *HSJ*, some experts believe that too little is being done to ensure that offenders with severe mental health problems are diverted from prison to hospital.

"Diversion schemes are clearly not diverting as much as they should because they have not been resourced to a level where they can be effective," says Mason.

There are also concerns that where models of care have been established — NHS "in-reach" teams, for example — they are often ineffective because inappropriate referrals mean that the most unwell prisoners go untreated.

There are examples of good practice, but even so in-reach work can, on occasions, be "distressing and distasteful", *HSJ* says.

Kevin Cryans, who manages an in-reach team at Preston prison, adds: "We are dealing with acutely unwell guys whose behaviour can be unpredictable. The environment can be discomfoting and is definitely not for everyone."