

# What others say...

## *Treatment of mentally ill in prison is humane*

To the editor:

I recently received a copy of the attached article written by Joseph James (*Some inmates in Alaska's prisons kept perpetually drugged in 'protective custody', 6/30*). Frankly, I was genuinely disappointed to learn that your newspaper had published such an article.

Apparently, the author purports to describe the experiences and emotions of a guilty but mentally ill prisoner who is incarcerated in the Fairbanks Correctional Center. Unfortunately for those who happened to read Mr. James' piece, it paints an ugly, distorted picture of a cruel and inhumane environment. This is simply not the case and, judging from the content of the article, appears to be more a reflection of the author's own imagination than the actual feelings and experiences of a mentally ill prisoner who is incarcerated in any of our correctional centers.

You may be interested to know that the author was correct insofar as the Department of Corrections does indeed have a small number of prisoners in custody who have been found guilty but mentally ill and sentenced by the courts to serve a term of imprisonment.

This began in 1982 when the Alaska Legislature was attempting to "tighten up" Alaska's criminal insanity statutes. In their attempts to do this, they passed a law that allows certain mentally ill criminals to be sent to

prison. Prior to this, many of these persons would have been found not guilty by reason of insanity and committed to Alaska Psychiatric Institute.

While the number of guilty but mentally ill prisoners that we have in our correctional centers is small, we do provide each with an individualized treatment plan and a program of mental health treatment that is appropriate to their specific needs. This treatment is provided by qualified psychiatrists, psychologists, and other mental health professionals in the correctional centers. In those cases in which the prisoner is acutely mentally ill and meets involuntary civil commitment standards, admission to API for a period of inpatient treatment may be arranged.

Regardless of whether a mentally ill prisoner is in API or in one of our State Correctional Centers, I can assure you that the treatment he or she receives is both humane in nature and of the highest possible quality. I'm afraid Mr. James has not accurately portrayed this in his article.

Sincerely,  
Roger V. Endell  
Commissioner

Department of Corrections

*Editor's note: The Tundra Times apologizes for not making it more clear that Mr. James' work was a column. His views are his own; they do not necessarily reflect the views of the paper.* □

## *More information on the guilty but mentally ill*

To the editor:

In the June 30 issue I wrote about how some inmates in Alaska's jails are being kept perpetually drugged. Since then I find that people want to know more details; so as well as I can, having only limited access, here is the rest of the story.

A man named Meach was on pass from API in Anchorage. While on pass he attempted to steal some items of little real value from a tent in a park. Several teenagers discovered him trying to steal from them, and in the next few moments they were shot to death by Meach.

The public reaction was very intense, especially since Meach had been previously found not guilty of a crime by reason of insanity or mental impairment or something like that.

Pressure was put on our legislators to do something which would prevent "nuts" from running around loose with guns.

They studied several options and decided that the Oregon laws were about the best around at the time, so they adopted the Oregon laws.

What they failed to do, however, was to also adopt Oregon's in-prison treatment program for the mentally ill. So for lack of any planning, the "guilty but mentally ill" are spread out among Alaska's regular jails.

Now bear with me as I quote several

portions of the Alaska statutes: "The Department of Corrections shall provide mental health treatment to a defendant found guilty but mentally ill. The treatment must continue until the defendant no longer suffers from a mental disease or defect that causes the defendant to be dangerous to the public."

This is the "joker" in the deck, as the Department of Corrections CANNOT provide mental health treatment. They do not have the physical layout, numbers of trained staff, budget, community support, or any of a hundred things needed.

To the prison administration, control is the primary objective. So when any prisoner fails to respond to "normal" control methods, he must be restrained.

Two of the drugs most commonly used are Thorazine and Mellorell. Both are very destructive to brain cells. The A.M.A. guidelines state that Mellorell should not be used for more than six months, as it could turn a man literally into a vegetable.

Now there are 7 "guilty but mentally ill," plus maybe 40 or 50 lesser cases who are receiving such drugs for their ENTIRE sentences — maybe 10 or more years. I truly hope that this is just an oversight which our Legislature will soon correct.

Joe James