Natural Bootleg

A prison drug-smuggler's story

November 1, 1998 By Michael Brennan

Before my first jail stint, I used the herb St. John's wort to treat the depression that had led me into heroin addiction. I'd also used Chinese herbs, antioxidants and other alternative treatments to deal with HIV. These legal medical strategies helped to keep me clean and healthy in the years before my 1995 relapse.

I did four months for heroin possession and shoplifting at the Multnomah County Restitution Center in Portland, Oregon. A work-release facility, it allowed me out for my daily job. When I asked the jail staff about bringing in my alternative treatments, I was told they weren't approved. Not looking for a fight, I simply did what prisoners have always done: I smuggled in the pills after work, hiding them in my crotch.

When my "stash" was discovered during a room search, I was sent to the maximum-security Inverness Jail in Troutdale. There I found heroin, cocaine and tobacco, smuggled in by hacks, inmates and visitors, but not a trace of any alternative treatment. So I wrote a letter to my sentencing judge. She quickly ordered my return to Multnomah, where I served out my remaining three months, uneventfully and unmedicated.

A few years later I briefly relapsed into active addiction, which led to a 10-day jail sentence at the Portland Justice Center on a bad-check charge. This time, I had my primary Western and alternative physicians write to the medical staff, requesting that I have access to my alternative therapies.

Permission was granted, but -- locked down 22 hours a day behind heavy steel -- I couldn't hear the first five med calls. I had to ask a guard to note in the log book that she should buzz my cell each time the nurse came. When I finally saw the nurse, it took him yet another day to track down my meds.

Unfortunately, my experiences are just mild examples of the medical neglect afforded most PWAs in prison. "It can be a tough battle even getting combination therapies on time, let alone multivitamins, nutritional food or alternative medications," says Jackie Walker, coordinator of the ACLU's AIDS in Prison Project.

Even here in the Northwest, where many insurance companies cover acupuncture and herbs,

inmates are routinely denied alternative options. Karen Campbell, an herbalist and Oregon State Penitentiary guard who directs that prison's AIDS program, says, "My attempt to give inmates access to something as innocuous as herbal teas was stymied by the administration's lack of understanding of these remedies." But she has heard of institutions where prisoner-tended decorative gardens sprout healthy crops of such flowering medicinal herbs as comfrey and yarrow. "I love seeing that ability to be healers come out in those we've identified as criminals," she says. "It's time we started nurturing that potential in everyone."

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