

The Caroline



Phillips column

Low-cost option for imprisoned junkies

RANDOM drugs tests are to be carried out on about 12,000 prisoners a year to combat the growing narcotics problem in jails. It's estimated that nearly half the inmates of British prisons take self-prescribed medication (heroin, LSD, cannabis and the like) while detained at Her Majesty's pleasure. That's a prison population of 49,000 in England and Wales alone. So the forthcoming tests should provide enough

material and statistics for Prison Service paper shufflers to write off an entire rainforest.

But aren't they locking the cell after the criminal has bolted? Isn't this approach comparable to giving HIV tests and forgetting about condoms and safe-sex education? Can it really be effective to discipline a hopeless junkie whose test proves positive?

Many prisoners are inside due to their addiction, rather than because they are

inherently criminal. Addicts deal in drugs or steal to support their habit, commit crimes of violence when drunk or stoned, and up to half of all property crime (the cost of which has soared to £4 billion a year) is drug-related.

The Addictive Diseases Trust, a pioneering charity, is fighting successfully against spiralling crime by treating prison inmates for substance abuse. The ADT programme — the first to establish itself full-time in a

penal institution, Downview Prison, Surrey — has rehabilitated a third of those it has treated. Remove people from the cycle of addiction and prison and many will cease to reoffend.

The drug tests cost £12 each — which is partly why they haven't been used before on a wide scale in prisons — and the number of notified addicts has risen fivefold since 1982.

By contrast, £1,500 is required to put an inmate through the ADT programme. So it wouldn't be logical to press the Prison Service to provide statutory funding.

After all, it only costs £23,000 a year to keep someone in prison.



I'M THE only journalist ever to have met Michael Jackson privately in over a decade, unless you count Oprah Winfrey. I spent several hours with him last year. Just after the beleaguered star cut short his world tour and admitted an addiction to pain killers. At the time, the world's journalists were searching the globe for him and The Sun was offering £10,000 for a sighting or photograph.

Jackson arrived heavily disguised in a red satin face mask and was driven in a Toyota Previa with clear glass windows and children in it. I was prevented, both then and now, from writing about our meeting, professionally the hardest thing I've ever had to bear. A number of legal and personal constraints impeded me from so doing, and I awaited an interview which has not yet transpired. (In my memoirs he'll appear in heavily camouflaged form, wearing a blue silk face mask.)

He didn't strike me as the marrying type. But last week it was reported that he wed Lisa Marie Presley. Surely the papers missed something out. That Elvis was there.

The exposure of my inflexible friend

SINCE I was given a piggy, I've banked with National Westminster. Unquestioningly, I queued and phoned my branch and held the line for so long my mum could have baked a soufflé. This year they improved and gave me a personal account manager, so I had someone dealing with my individual requirements. One to one service which concentrated the mind wonderfully on the cheque books that never arrived.

Recently, I received a customer service questionnaire

asking about my experience of Nat West over the last six months. The bank sends 132,000 of these to a random selection every month, and 20 per cent respond. I'm not normally one to fill in holiday competitions, coupons and finish the ditties on the packet of Persil, but I did it.

I considered it at length. Muddled such options as "The branch has made no effort to provide enough staff to satisfy demand" and "More often than not they've made a mistake" and "Have you had to give all the details to more than one person before

they found someone who could answer your question properly?"

Then I moved my account to The Royal Bank of Scotland.

Overpriced facilities



Bargain hunter: Betty Boothroyd

IMISSED the redoubtable Betty Boothroyd, who opened the Harrods sale, and I ended up standing mournfully outside what rank among the world's most expensive lavatories. Or luxury ladies' washrooms, in Fayed-speak. The lavatories cost £250,000: each cistern and bowl was over £10,000, the room is fitted with £40,000-worth of Italian marble and you wave your hand in front of an infra-red sensor at the basin to turn on the water.

Entry costs £1. This buys a swipe card which operates the electronic sensor to the inner sanctum. (Harrods card? That'll do nicely.)

About 300,000 people went to the top people's store on the first day of the sale. All the women I saw shrieked in disbelief and headed off for a free pee round the corner. Only 400 could afford to spend more than a penny. Who said the recession was lifting?

Care but no attention

HOSPITAL authorities were only alerted to the disappearance of a pensioner who had offered himself as a guinea pig for medical students in a Manchester hospital when his relatives became worried. He was discovered on 9 July in the hospital lavatory, dead. He'd been there for 19 hours, and his grief-stricken family are calling for an inquiry.

Equally tragic is the tale of a man who last year went to Bart's for his heart-outpatients appointment. He signed in and was dispatched along the corridor to see his consultant. He never arrived, and nobody noticed. Two weeks later he was discovered,

decomposing in the gents.

Fortunately, all is not gloomy. I have a friend who is a renal specialist in a major London hospital. Returning to work after a short holiday, he made a brisk walk round the wards. Then he discovered a cheerful chap in stripy pyjamas lying on a trolley in the corridor.

My friend asked him how he was. The gentleman pulled the blankets up under his chin, but said he felt all right. My friend, noticing something amiss, enquired whether he'd completed the admission procedure. The man replied that he thought so. "I have been here a week," he replied.

I AM a middle-class dinner party bore. I bore for Britain about moving house and builders. The indisputable fact is that we've had more work done on our flat than anyone else, ever, in the universe. We've had more clobber to move than if the Queen emptied Buckingham Palace, and suffered enough stress to break a bridge. We escape the never-decreasing contents of the removal van by going to the Royal Opera's Aida at Kenwood. En route, we collect a friend of our host. A delightful hybrid of Mandy Smith and Jewish American Princess, she enquires whether I've had a nice weekend. I say that I must have unpacked about 150 cases. "Oh, have you been on holiday?" she replies.

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