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Offenders' Anger Control Classes Help Make Some More Dangerous; Courses Axed as Result of Monckton Murder Inquiry – Killer's Training Helped Him Win Release

By Alan Travis, Home Affairs Editor

Anger management courses for convicted armed robbers, wife beaters and stalkers are being axed by the prison and probation services following an official inquiry into the murder of the city financier John Monckton.

Home Office instructions sent to the probation service say that anger management courses are counterproductive and actually help violent offenders who make premeditated attacks to manipulate the situation to their advantage.

In a move to ensure that probation staff also do the basics of their job properly, the home secretary, Charles Clarke, will today address a meeting of more than 800 probation service managers to demand a much sharper focus on high-risk offenders. He is also expected to make a renewed attempt to persuade the crisis-hit probation service to back his controversial public sector reform programme.

The Home Office has said Mr Clarke “will not be reading the riot act”, despite the recent scandals.

The circular about the anger management courses follows the fatal stabbing in 2004 of Monckton, who was 49. Damien Hanson, aged 25, killed the banker after tricking his way into his house in Chelsea with his accomplice, Elliot White, aged 24. Hanson had been released from prison after serving half of a 12-year sentence for attempted murder.

The official inquiry report said that Hanson's 24 sessions of an anger management course known as CALM had helped him convince a parole board review panel that he should be released.

Home Office instructions say that such courses for violent offenders who commit their crimes purposefully rather than impulsively are now “considered wholly inappropriate”. They add that it is now thought the courses “have the potential to equip the offender with additional control mechanisms and increase his/her capacity to manipulate a situation to their advantage and power”.

The decision is a blow to anger management courses, which have gained a reputation for therapeutic value that has been growing in recent years.

The British supermodel Naomi Campbell is among those known to have attended anger management courses in recent years. She took a course at a clinic in Arizona after a series of incidents including an

attempt to hit an assistant over the head with a telephone. Several high-profile premiership footballers have escaped jail on condition of attending anger management courses.

The principal anger management course now used in British prisons is the CALM programme, an acronym for controlling anger and learning to manage it. A course typically consists of 24 sessions arranged into six blocks designed also to teach skills.

A clinical assessment had been needed to identify those who might benefit from the programme. The Home Office now states that such courses should only be available for violent offenders who launch unplanned attacks through losing their temper, in circumstances which might be fuelled by drugs and alcohol.

The candidates could include those who have committed criminal damage or public disorder, or those who have become involved in arguments that have led to brawls and fights.

The courses are still to be considered useful in cases where “the offender demonstrates the capacity for reflection and learning, or he or she can benefit from cognitive self-change interventions to improve consequential thinking skills”. But they will be banned for those who get involved in “instrumental violence”, meaning those acts that are premeditated with potential victims earmarked before the attack is launched.

Past behaviour should be enough to tell the probation or prison staff who falls into which category.

In the case of the Monckton murder, the inquiry report said the CALM programme was seen to have had a particularly beneficial effect on Hanson before his release. Hanson reported that the programme had helped him to understand why he reacted “to certain situations” and how he could control the feelings that led to him “becoming angry and in some cases violent”.

The inquiry report said the programme helped the parole board to recommend his release but had done very little to tackle his use of instrumental violence.

A Home Office spokesman said that anger management courses were effective at teaching self-management techniques. However, some offenders did not engage in violent behaviour because of anger. “They use violence as a means to achieve a specific goal, for example to intimidate a victim during the course of a robbery, or the imposition of will on a partner in ... domestic violence. There are other interventions and therapies that address the root causes of this instrumental violence (such as lack of empathy) which might be more beneficial to these individuals when delivered as part of a risk management package.”

The spokesman added that while some offenders displayed both types of violent behaviour, teaching anger management skills without addressing instrumental violence could prove to be counterproductive.

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