

The detainees service

In South Africa there are health services for detainees in Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, Grahamstown, East London, Durban, Pietermaritzburg and Johannesburg. Services were first established in 1985 and have continued to grow as a result of mass detentions under the State of Emergency. Besides these services doctors and a few counsellors, who have an understanding of the health problems of ex-detainees, are also seeing ex-detainees in other places.

The detainee health services are run by members of progressive health organisations, mostly on a voluntary basis. This often makes it difficult to provide an ongoing service as health workers are not always able to take off time from their other work. Because of this we have trained many health workers in the problems of ex-detainees, to cope with the need.

Appointments to be seen in these services are made through the detainee aid centres. (See contact addresses on previous page)



Many detainees choose to go for counselling to work through their feelings after the stress of detention

Why are there special health services for detainees?

It is often difficult for a private or a clinic doctor to spend enough time with ex-detainees to attend to all their health problems. In the detainee health service a doctor may spend up to an hour with each person.

It is clear that counselling is important for ex-detainees but most doctors have not been trained in counselling. This could be harmful as problems may be missed or not taken seriously enough. For this reason, the detainee service offers counselling by counsellors who are trained to help with the special problems of ex-detainees. This is very important as it is difficult to get to these counsellors through the ordinary health services.

What happens in the health service?

The health services differ according to the number of health workers and the way they are run. However, in most health services, one sees both a doctor and a counsellor.



Upon release from detention, ex-detainees can attend special health services, run by progressive health workers

What the doctor will do

The doctor spends time hearing about the health problems and experiences in detention and performs a careful examination to see if there are any serious problems.

If the doctor finds the ex-detainee to be healthy, reassurance should be given that the ex-detainee has not been permanently affected by detention.

The doctor often finds problems to be related to stress. Physical and psychological problems usually come together and can show up as psychological strain through pains in the body. Headaches and stomach pains are examples of this. This is normal and is treated by combining counselling with medicines for the pains. Problems found are explained carefully to the person.



Detainees' problems do not always end after they are released

If needed, follow-up consultations are arranged. For example, a hearing test or an appointment for a specialist for assessment of high blood pressure. In some cases more information is required and X-rays or blood tests may be undertaken.

The clinic cannot see ex-detainees for all their problems and is also unable to continue providing services to individuals seen. After the first one or two visits individuals are referred to a private doctor or clinic for follow up.

The service does provide some medication. A common need is for medicines to help people sleep. Careful attention is given so that medicines will not cause addiction or make one very sleepy during the day.

Some clinics offer some other services like physiotherapy which is used to help body pains and tension through treatments like massage and exercises.

What the counsellor will do

Many people find it difficult to understand how counselling works. Strong feelings can be unpleasant and difficult to understand and often make people feel upset and unhappy. The counsellor helps the person understand what these feelings are all about.

It can be difficult for a person to explain how they are feeling. Counsellors help the person to explain their feelings to others. This helps the ex-detainee make better contact with other people. Counsellors encourage ex-detainees to talk to family members, friends or comrades whom they can trust and whom they feel can understand them.

Counselling is not just talking. Counselling deals with feelings through talking. If you only talk about feelings and do not feel them, the counselling is not working. It is not easy to work on feelings. It can be painful and tiring. Some people are not used to it and find it too difficult. More and more ex-detainees are finding counselling useful. Some enter the clinic saying "I don't mind seeing the doctor but I came to see the psychologist. I have a psychological problem".

We think there is a growing awareness of the psychological effects of detention. Some ex-detainees have reported that counselling has helped them recover faster.

Some people do not choose counselling and prefer, rather, to talk to family or friends. Some people try to bury their problems and others land up feeling helpless.

Where a counsellor can help

The counsellor is trained to understand the problems of the ex-detainee and how to work with their problems. With counselling a person can work through the feelings to the point where they can cope with them. From there, a person can develop normally. For many detainees release from detention brings new problems such as harassment, unemployment, accommodation problems, family crises and court cases. Under these conditions recovery is more difficult and takes longer. A person may need more help.

How the counsellor works with the ex-detainee

Firstly the ex-detainee needs to trust the counsellor. The counsellor will try to build this trust and discuss it with the ex-detainee. The counsellor aims to respond to the problems of the ex-detainee at this time.

The counsellor is not there to judge the detainee personally or politically, eg the



Counsellors at the Detainees Service are trained to understand the specific problems of ex-detainees. They can help them to cope with their problems

way the detainee responded to interrogation. Bad experiences in detention are often caused by people. This makes it more difficult for the ex-detainee to trust the counsellor. Building trust helps the detainee to recover.

From there the counsellor encourages the ex-detainee to talk about his/her feelings. This can be difficult and take time but the counsellor helps the person understand the feelings.

Mostly counsellors don't give advice. They help the person come to their own decisions. For example, if the person is feeling very helpless, the counsellor works on the helplessness until the person can take his/her own decision.

Counsellors usually want to see people more than once. With serious problems the counsellor can work with the ex-detainee for some months or for however long is needed.

Aims for the doctor in seeing the ex-detainee

- Give the ex-detainee as much control as possible over the interview.
- Attend to health problems raised by the ex-detainee, explain all findings.
- Check general health and exclude serious illness. Reassure the patient if well.
- Refer problems for follow-up or further assessment as needed.
- Give medicines as needed.
- Document injuries.
- Understand and identify psychological problems. Deal with basic counselling if there is no counsellor available, and refer serious problems.
- Work closely with counsellors and other health workers in a team approach.

Aims for the counsellor

- To build trust with the ex-detainee.
- To assess if there is Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, and its severity.
- To reach some of the worst feelings that result from the trauma of detention. This can be difficult where the detainee has withdrawn or has strong defences.
- Provide follow-up where possible.