

Rethink urged on delinquency

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Dr. Eileen Slack, deputy superintendent of Winlaton youth training centre, would like institutions like Winlaton to put emphasis on preventing delinquency, as well as on treating it.

"We have the mechanisms and the tools to be in preventive delinquency," she told yesterday's annual meeting of the International Association of Youth Magistrates (Victorian branch).

"That's where we should be placing our forces."

Dr. Slack spoke eloquently of the treatment and conditions available to girls at Winlaton, which she described as the only facility in the State for the "adjudicated female".

She was accompanied by a teenage girl, "Jane", serving two-years there. "Jane" also addressed the meeting.

The institution was not a holiday camp and not the Bastille, Dr. Slack said. It was a place where the staff walked precariously in trying to understand the physical and emotional needs of its young women.

"Many, some of them 13 or 14 years old, have had to face situations that I in my 42 years have not had to face," she said.

"Most when they come in are quite scared. We have to try and show them how to become productive citizens, how to become self-motivated.

"We must try to turn them into giving citizens, not just wards of State. We must show them that we care."

About 20 people attended the meeting. They included magistrates, probation officers, JPs,

By ANNE LATREILLE

women with an interest in the law as it affects children.

Dr. Slack asked if any of them had visited Winlaton.

"Do you know what happens there?"

"When you are sitting in a court and you hear a magistrate decide that this young woman should go to Winlaton, do you know what it means?"

"Do you know the struggles we have, particularly with the physical plant that is so run down?"

She said a magistrate's action in taking a life and putting it in charge of the Winlaton staff imposed an "awesome" responsibility.

Dr. Slack and "Jane" talked of the peer group therapy which Dr. Slack has promoted since her arrival, 12 months ago, from the US.

This assumes that young people of similar age and experience have much to offer each other. It depends on frank exchange of views and on advice given by someone (Dr. Slack calls her the "ex") who has been through a certain problem (like drugs, violence, trouble with parents) and has overcome it.

"Jane" said many girls there used their problems as crutches to avoid having to face up to them. Peer group therapy helped greatly with this, she said.

"We must get youth to look at themselves and understand themselves better," Dr. Slack stressed.

"We already have ex-inmates coming back to talk to the girls.



Dr. Eileen Slack

Now, in our sessions, I can mouth off all I like and they're yawning. But get in one girl that I'm thinking of, who used to be really rough and tough but is now a qualified nurse and happily married, and they really listen.

"We want to get into the schools, work with the school counsellors, get them out to Winlaton to see what we are doing.

"There is this whole network set up out there in our schools, that can be used.

"Many pupils are walking along precarious roads, and they could slide back and end up in Winlaton, Turana, even Pentridge and Fairlea.

"If we can get kids to talk to them who say: 'Look at what you're doing, I've been through this and I know that if you keep going not only will you hurt society but you'll wreck your own life' . . . then maybe we can help."

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