



FRIEND OR FOE?

Sniffer dogs are now a common sight in train stations, airports and even schools. But few people are aware they are being brought in to search mentally ill patients on hundreds of psychiatric wards across the country. **Max Daly** investigates

There was a growing sense of panic on the ward, as the two drug sniffer dogs darted between patients, beds, bags and cupboards. Three members of staff at the Arnold Lodge medium secure unit in Leicester were restraining one patient who had started to attack a spaniel. Two others were refusing to be searched, screaming abuse at anyone who came near them.

"There were incidents going off everywhere," says a staff member, of the visit in 2007 of a canine drug search unit onto the ward. The previous year five psychiatric patients who were being treated at Arnold Lodge were wrongly charged with possession of illegal drugs, after forensic tests contradicted positive

indications given by sniffer dogs. "Sometimes the dogs have caused chaos, especially on the acute ward," says the staff member, who does not want to be named. "Some searches de-stabilised a lot of our patients and this had a ripple effect on other wards."

The use of sniffer dogs to search for drugs on medium to low security mental health wards, virtually unheard of 10 years ago, is now a tactic being used in a rising number of NHS and private psychiatric units. A *Druglink* investigation has revealed that drug dogs are being regularly deployed to search mentally ill people on scores of wards across the country each year. Of 20 regional mental health trusts in

England who responded to *Druglink*, 15 said they had brought in sniffer dogs to search patients on wards within their control.

Two private security firms offering drug dog services said they had contracts to regularly search for drugs at 36 NHS and private psychiatric units. And Progress, a national forum of nurse consultants who specialise in dual diagnosis and substance misuse, said it is aware of 28 NHS trusts that are using or considering the use of search dogs.

Studies have shown that, despite traditional security measures such as drug tests and manual searches, more than half of patients on mental health wards are current or ex-drug users. But

while the difficulties of successfully treating mental health patients who are using illegal drugs are well known, the use of sniffer dogs is viewed by some as being draconian, humiliating, and an infringement of people's human rights. In addition, the largest study into the accuracy of drug dogs, carried out in Australia, found that in three out of four cases when dogs were used to detect drugs, the dogs got it wrong.

Yet health chiefs across England are increasingly of the mind that using dog teams, while not ideal, will give patients a better chance of treatment success. "Keeping drugs out of our wards is a very important part of treating people who are very unwell," says Dr Mike Harris, executive director of forensic services at Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust, which runs five secure mental health units including Rampton high security hospital and Arnold Lodge. "If people are drug-free it makes treating mental illness much more straight forward. If using drug dogs helps us treat people, then that's what we'll do."

Patients and their beds and belongings are searched by sniffer dogs on random days four times a year at Arnold Lodge, while extra visits occur if there is suspicion that drugs are being used on wards. Despite the account given to *Druglink* of dogs causing chaos among patients at Arnold Lodge, Dr Harris says he has seen "no evidence" to show that patients find it disturbing. Indeed, around half the mental health service user groups contacted by *Druglink* said that sniffer dogs had posed no problem on their wards.

John Franklin-Webb, of International Consultants on Targeted Security (ICTS), says the mental health sector is a growing source of business for drug dog firms. "Five years ago we visited no wards, but now we regularly go into a large number of NHS and private units. We search patients, beds, property and visitors." He says a reasonably high proportion of searches generate positive indications by dogs. Cannabis and white powders are the most commonly found substances.

"But it's only right if it's done correctly and protocols are in place," says Franklin-Webb. "If the client has a robust drugs and search policy, if they know what to do if someone is indicated or found carrying drugs, then there is no issue." Most hospitals will only contact the police if drugs are found in significant quantities.

The use of dogs on wards is not

always so straightforward. In November last year members of North Staffs User Group (NSUD), a pressure group for people who have experienced mental illness, were on a routine visit to the high dependency unit at Harplands hospital in Stoke-on-Trent when a police dog search began.

"All the patients on the ward were herded into the day room without any proper explanation as to what was happening and told they had to stay where they were," wrote an NSUD member in a memo to the group. "When one patient tried to leave they were very brusquely told to go back in. No members of staff came into the day room and everyone in there began to get more and more agitated as the dogs and police searched the ward.

"No account was taken of the fact that these were very ill people being put together in a very confined space with no apparent concern about their well being. You could feel the tension growing by the minute. I appreciate that these searches have to take place without prior warning, but when they are underway surely the service users should get proper care and reassurance about what is going on and a potentially inflammatory situation can be avoided. The fact that police were on the ward is a catalyst for an upset in itself, but the way it was handled was completely unacceptable. I believe it is nowhere near the first time that it has happened."

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As a result of the incident, North Staffordshire NHS Trust drew up fresh guidelines on the use of sniffer dogs on its wards. As with the use of sniffer dogs to search pupils in schools (see *Druglink* May-June 2004), it appears that hospitals are left to their own devices when planning the method and implications of the strategy. There are no guidelines on the use of sniffer dogs on wards issued by the Department of Health or the Royal College of Psychiatrists.

Cheryl Kipping, a nurse consultant in dual diagnosis, sparked debate on the sniffer dog issue in June within the pages of *Advances in Dual Diagnosis*, a specialist journal that she co-edits.

"Advocates argue that it will reduce the amount of substance use, send a clear message that illicit drug use will not be tolerated, and, most importantly,

promote a safer environment in which staff and service users can work collaboratively towards the person's recovery. Detractors see their use as heavy handed, believe it promotes a controlling, intrusive, custodial ethos, and is detrimental to therapeutic relationships," says Kipping who works at the South London and Maudsley NHS Trust (SLAM), which carries out routine, randomised sniffer dog sweeps on its two medium secure units once a month.

"If dogs are to be used it is essential that they are part of a package of wider measures – drug dogs will not provide a quick fix. Service users themselves should be involved in deciding whether dogs are used, and in developing procedures for their use.

"Unlike the substance misuse field, where admission to inpatient/residential units is voluntary and people can be discharged if they use drugs while on a treatment programme, significant numbers of people in psychiatric wards are detained in hospital under the provision of the Mental Health Act. They are often very unwell and can be extremely vulnerable."

Dave Manley, chair of Progress and a nurse consultant in dual diagnosis at Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust says many staff on psychiatric wards around the country have expressed concern about "widespread use of sniffer dogs in a considerable number of trusts".

"If psychiatric teams are prepared to work with people to address their drug and alcohol problems, drug searches on units are rarely required," says Progress. "Unfortunately there are times when the need to search and occasionally use sniffer dogs becomes unavoidable, especially when ward staff become aware of ongoing drug use and they need to tackle this. The appropriate use of sniffer dogs can ensure staff are not alone in meeting this challenge.

"Our members have been working hard to ensure that their individual trusts have comprehensive, locally agreed, policies on the use of drug sniffer dogs on acute psychiatric wards and other mental health residential units. But there is clearly a need for further national guidance from the Department of Health on this matter."

The staff member who described the negative effect on patients at Arnold Lodge has already come to her conclusion. "Body searches and drug testing is sufficient. There is no other method that is needed. In my eyes, sniffer dogs are more detrimental than beneficial."