

Comedian walks into a jail...

A charity has enlisted a stand-up comic to challenge mental health stigma among prisoners. Andrew Mickel reports

Mixing race, mental health and imprisonment with comedy may sound like a pitch for a Frankie Boyle remake of *Porridge*, but it's the basis for a new scheme to encourage

prisoners to access mental health services. Bringing the Outside In, from charity Southside Partnership, uses stand-up comedy to try to break down the stigma around discussing mental health. Focus groups were held in three Surrey jails on the themes of race and mental health ahead of a performance by a comedian in Downview Prison last February. That was recorded to a DVD that has been sent to every prison in the country. And prisons can commission workshops to go with it.

The original idea came from Obinna Ugoala, a community development worker for the charity's Beyond Prison programme.

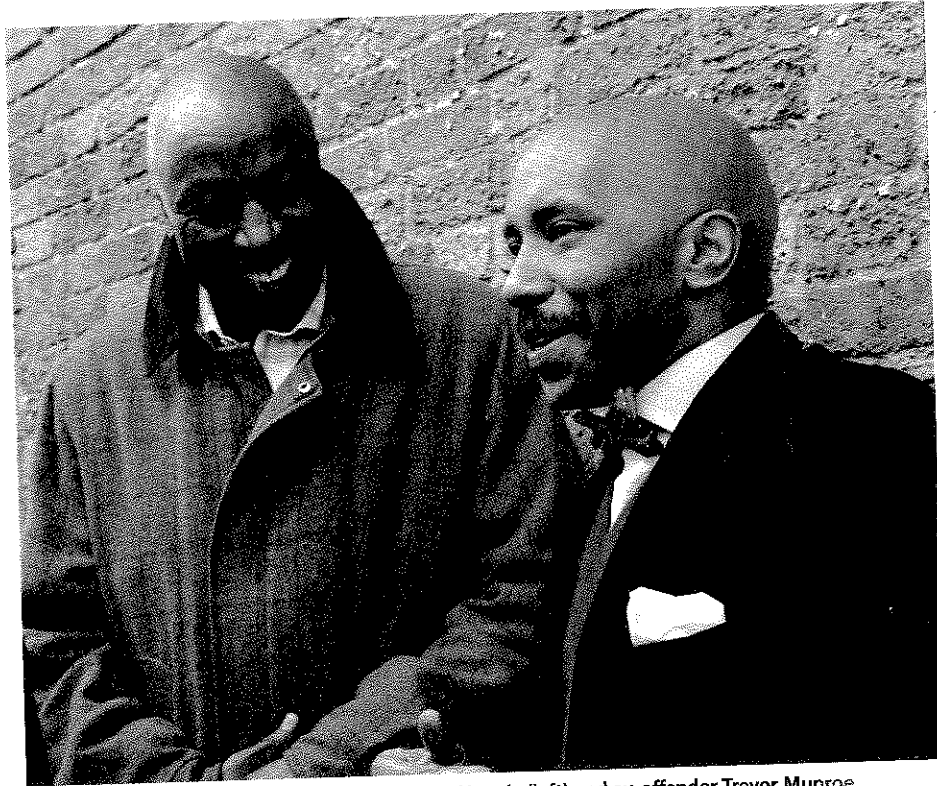
"Many prisoners won't have been diagnosed and maybe haven't even considered themselves [as having mental health problems], but there are feelings and things going on in their minds that they are questioning," says Ugoala. "This is a tool that will be useful to get them thinking, definitely."

The project was an obvious fit for the organisation. Beyond Prison runs a mix of schemes to help people through the process of leaving

prison, as well as community development projects inside, and the charity has a history of working with ethnic minority groups. The DVD was funded with a £63,000 grant from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

Despite the organisation's focus on ethnic minorities, John Ryan, the comedian who was brought in to do the work, is a white man from Hackney, east London – a fact that didn't escape the attention of the three focus groups he ran before the performance.

"The first focus group was 16 lads," says Ryan. "I didn't use PowerPoint or the white board or make notes; we just chatted. And they pointed out the fact there's a white man coming into prison to talk about racism, which is a good point. So I said, I



Challenging stigma: community worker Obinna Ugoala (left) and ex-offender Trevor Munroe

think you'll find we invented it'.

"There was a moment of silence...and then everyone cracked up."

Ryan's performance follows the same lines as his first focus group encounter: it is clearly a stand-up show, but has one eye on providing thoughts for prisoners to take away. The script was reviewed by NHS Surrey's public health lead, and poetry from the prisoners was mixed into the perform-

ance. "It gave them back their show and something to work towards," says Ryan.

The project's development had its complications and participants had to leap several bureaucratic hurdles. For a start, the Prisons Service had to be sure the performance would not become a tabloid headline. The prison authorities themselves needed reassurance from Ryan that he would not make jokes at their expense. And more paperwork was required to place ex-offender members of staff into prison.

But the result has been successful. A report by the Institute of Psychiatry at King's College London has found that prisoners who see the DVD are more likely to disclose mental health problems, ask for help and access resources.

The next step is to use the DVD in workshops to help prisoners talk about their mental health. That is being run by ex-offender Trevor Munroe, who brings to bear his own experiences with mental health problems and substance abuse.

SPEAKING OUT

"You get caught up in the stigma," he says. "I've done many sentences where I was a big man, wasn't able to speak about my stuff because thinking about that meant showing vulnerability, and that kept me in a place of being unwell."

"I'm going to give them a safe environment to take the risk of talking about stuff they don't normally speak about. The DVD is a way of getting my foot in the door."

Although no workshops have yet taken place, several prisons have shown interest, and the DVD is being sent to community services such as supported housing projects.

However, Munroe is paid for his work only if workshops are commissioned. Still, the DVD's legacy helped the project win an NHS South East Coast award.

"I've always looked at this product as an educational tool," Ugoala says. "It's not a magic wand, it's not going to cure anybody, but it lets people go back to their cells with the feeling that they can actually talk about it."

→ See the DVD at <http://vimeo.com/13324302>

"There was a moment of silence...and then everyone cracked up"

JOHN RYAN, COMEDIAN