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Inside. One Man's Experience of Prison. By John Hoskison. London: John Murray. 1998. 211 pp. £15.99 (hb). ISBN 0-7195-5569-8

Inside is an autobiographical account of the author's experience in four prisons during an 18-month sentence he served from October 1995.

John Hoskison was a professional golfer who competed on the European Tour with some success, before becoming the professional at the West Surrey Golf Club in 1986. He describes prison life through articulate middle-class eyes, and throughout the book he expresses his frustration that prison is so often seen as a soft option. His time in two inner London dispersal prisons proved to be a sobering introduction, and he provides a graphic account of the squalid and brutal conditions in these overcrowded institutions.

Inside highlights some of the key problems currently facing the prison service, namely the epidemic of drug misuse, the high prevalence of mental illness and the high rates of suicide.

One of the themes throughout the 21 chapters of the book is the magnitude of the drug problem in the prison system, and what the author sees as the authorities' impotence and incompetence in dealing with this. Indeed, Hoskison claims that significant amounts of drugs are brought in by prison officers. He draws attention to the problems with the practice of mandatory drugs testing, especially the increase in heroin use which has followed as inmates turn away from the more readily detectable cannabis.

Inside is a compulsive and highly readable book, which I would strongly recommend to anyone who works in a prison. As psychiatrists we frequently assess inmates in prison, but very rarely do we venture beyond the relative calm and tranquillity of the health care centre. Hoskison describes in vivid, and often disturbing detail life on normal location. Such an understanding of the stark realities of prison life is essential if we are to comprehend the psychological problems inmates present with, and can only help to improve our ability to perform accurate assessments.

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