

UNSW Fulbright Scholar to examine impact of natural environment on prisoner behaviour and mental health

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Could prison gardens and other features of the natural landscape reduce mental health problems and stress among prisoners? This is one of the questions that Fulbright Senior Scholar, Professor Kate Dolan hopes to answer as part of her Kansas State University funded 2019 Fulbright Scholarship.

Professor Dolan, who is an international expert in infectious disease prevention and drug treatment in prisons, says the scholarship will allow her to take a cross disciplinary approach to harm reduction in prisons, working with collaborators from the faculties of Architecture and Sociology at Kansas State University.

“The world prison population now exceeds 10 million with an estimated 30 million people passing through prisons each year,” says Professor Dolan.

“Prisoners have high levels of alcohol and drug abuse, infectious diseases and mental illness. Their lives are characterised by violence both as perpetrators and victims.

All these factors can cause stress and promote poor behaviour. There is a need to reduce stress and improve inmate behaviour and ideally in an inexpensive way for resource poor countries.”

Through the Scholarship, Professor Dolan will work with her US colleagues to produce guidelines for the Australian prison setting aimed at reducing stress and examining the impact on prisoner behaviour and mental health of common practices such as solitary confinement.

In the healthcare setting key factors such as a sense of control, access to privacy, social support, exercise and natural distractions have been identified to have a positive impact on mental health, says Professor Dolan.

“We also know from previous studies that there is a positive correlation between the natural environment and stress reduction.

“Prison gardens are one example. When gardens have been introduced, there have been physical and psychological benefits for inmates and staff.”

The Fulbright Scholar Award, funded by Kansas State University, is for senior academics, government scientists or other key researchers to undertake a collaborative project at Kansas State University (K-State) in the United States. Successful scholars will work with a tenured or tenure-track colleague at Kansas State on a significant collaborative short-term research program in any academic discipline.

Professor Dolan is the Head of the Program of International Research and Training at the University of New South Wales. During her Fulbright Scholarship, she will spend six months in Kansas, establishing a formal partnership between her research centre and Kansas State University (K-State).

This partnership, as well as her partnership with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, will address many of the health issues facing prisoners in the U.S, Australia and in the developing world.

Kate will use her time at K-State to build professional networks in the prison health care and research fields, to enhance her knowledge and to commence collaborative projects between the two institutions.

To read more about UNSW Fulbright scholars see [UNSW Newsroom](#).

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