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Drainage and disease in Australia's colonial prison system.

In the 200 years since establishment of the British colony of New South Wales, Australia, management of prisoner health has been influenced by legislative changes as well as the need to respond to reports of disease and death resulting from inadequate prison conditions. Despite recognition of the importance of sanitation within the developing science of public health, legislation to protect public health was largely focussed on the general population, with prisoner health left wanting.

The setting for this paper is the carceral system established within the growing city that was colonial Sydney and beyond into country New South Wales, Australia. Historical records were examined to identify issues of health, sanitation and the impact of legislative changes on the systems that regulated and provided healthcare to prisoners.

The historic example of gastrointestinal disease presented here demonstrates that legislation to collect health data in prisons was not matched by effective means to improve health outcomes for these same prisoners, despite recognition of architectural requirements for drainage. The data collection in prisons and the reports provided at inquiries and inquests provide valuable information about the various diseases responsible for outbreaks. In 1863, a particularly virulent disease was attributed to typhoid fever but may have been due to the gastrointestinal virus, hepatitis A.

A major lesson from history is the need for a bespoke system of care for prisoners. This study has relevance to the contemporary systems of healthcare which support those individuals who belong to a uniquely vulnerable population by virtue of being housed behind prison walls.