

# Plan to Study Violent Cons Stirs Controversy

*Chronicle Correspondent  
By Charles Howe*

Davis

A new proposal to study California's 700 especially violent prison inmates drew verbal violence, of a sort, at a top-level meeting of psychiatric professionals here last week.

The proposal — still in the works — would involve creation of an 84-patient facility at the Vacaville Medical Facility within the next month.

Hard-core troublesome inmates from various prison adjustment centers would spend up to eight months at the maximum-security facility while their individual psyches were being plumbed to see what makes them violent.

This concept was presented to some 23 psychiatrists, psychologists and other health professionals at the University of California at Davis Faculty Club by Dr. Lawrence Bennett, chief of research of the Department of Corrections.

## INMATES

Once the new facility is in business the violent inmates will be studied — no one is sure just how — to determine what makes them violent.

These studies will include everything from measuring their intelligence to determining what specific sorts of situations trigger them into violence.

Hopefully, Bennett said, the results of this study will give prison authorities better ways of identifying violent inmates and reaching them before they begin "acting out" on other inmates.

At the end of their stay,

some of the inmates may remain in maximum custody for the rest of their sentence. Others, he said, might be released into the prison's general population and still others might be eligible for a parole.

## GROUP

It drew almost immediate flak from a Berkeley psychologist and a small and orderly group of college-age protesters.

"Are we going to engage in more torture?" asked Dr. Edward M. Opton Jr., senior research psychologist at The Wright Institute at Berkeley.

Opton, who registered his objections to the new facility after lunch, cited at least one controversial mode of treatment formerly used — and since discontinued — at Vacaville.

## DRUG

Specifically, he objected to the use of succinylcholine, a drug which when used in profusion gives a person the feeling of dying.

Moments after Opton raised the issue of the lack of outside controls at the new facility — he cited possible shock treatments on inmates — the protesters walked into the meeting.

They carried signs reading: "Prisoners Are People — No Electroshock."

At this point Bennett had not, in fact, indicated just how the inmates who will pass through the experimental facility will be treated.

## METHODS

He did say, however, that any inmate being subjected to new methods of diagnosis and treatment would have to

give authorities his consent.

"Yes," replied Opton. "just like a private in the Army gives his consent to carrying out an order."

The various professionals gathered to offer their advice on the corrections project sat quietly through the protest.

The protesters left after about 20 minutes.

Opinions solicited on lines of treatment and diagnosis ranged from experimental work done in reducing the output of male hormones to measuring the brain waves of certain offenders as a diagnostic tool.

## PROPOSAL

One psychologist objected to the proposed Vacaville concept because, as Bennett explained it, research personnel would not have full control over the administrative end of running the facility.

Bennett, who had earlier said he was not against the use of succinylcholine, per se, replied:

"Then you have to hang it up; it can't be done."

He added that any ethical or legal questions about the range of treatment for the future facility would be worked out by the Attorney General.