

QUARANTINE  
Saturday  
March 2, 2013

When I first arrived here at the California Men's Colony (CMC) in September of 2006, a lot of things were different. For starters, almost every cell had a small broom which the inmate could use to sweep his cell; an empty 5-gallon peanut butter bucket which served as a garbage can, a mop bucket and a laundry bucket; and access to cleaning supplies. As time passed, these items were gradually removed for claims that they posed a threat to the safety and security of the facility.

The first to go were the brooms kept in the inmates' cells. Prison officials explained that they were concerned that inmates could break them into pieces, and use them to manufacture weapons. As a result, one day they were all collected and disposed of, costing the State an as yet undetermined amount of money.

Next to go were the 5-gallon buckets which inmates were using for trash cans, personal mop and laundry buckets. For years, decades even, rather than disposing of these empty 5-gallon peanut butter buckets after serving peanut butter for breakfast or lunch, they simply reused them, albeit for a different purpose. For the longest time, this satisfied everyone. In the end though, the prison administration decided that these buckets posed a threat to the safety and security of the facility because inmates could use them to make wine. Never mind the fact that there was no lid, and that doing so created loud and offensive odors that could be smelt all up and down the tier. Rather than keeping their eyes open for such rule violations during their numerous cell searches, they simply decided to remove the buckets altogether, gathering them up by the thousand and throwing them away.

As far as the prison was concerned, while they might have taken these things from the inmate population, they'd left a viable alternative. For example, on the wall near the officer's podium, there were a number of hooks, in which brooms and dustpans were hung. There was also a mop closet containing a mop and a mop bucket, all of which was accessible anytime the inmates were allowed out of their cells. As far as buckets to wash personal laundry was concerned, at the last moment, they decided to leave 6 buckets in the recreation shack, which could be signed out and returned later that day by any inmate needing to use it. Of course, there were close to 1,000 inmates wanting to use them, but this issue was overlooked.

A little more than a month ago, the CMC prison administration decided that they hadn't gone far enough. As a result, they decided to take all the brooms, mops, dustpans and mop buckets and put them in the mop closet, which was locked all day each and every day. No longer were we permitted to use these materials when needed, yet we were still expected to keep our cells clean at all times. Like most rules implemented by prison officials, we weren't happy with what we'd been told, but we quickly learned to adapt. Most of us went back to the way we used to do things at higher level prisons. Toilets were scrubbed and disinfected until they literally shone like a mirror. Afterwards, we'd add chemicals, dip in a rag, and wipe down the walls and floor of our cells. As far as cleaning laundry is concerned, instead of cleaning chemicals, we'd simply add laundry detergent, and use the toilet bowl as a laundry bucket. It sounds disgusting, and it's definitely not the most sanitary thing, but we simply had no other options.

A few weeks ago, the CMC's prison administration decided once again that they hadn't gone far enough. This time, they decided that inmates were no longer allowed to possess disinfectant, and they searched everyone's cells, removing what they found. Brooms, mops, dustpans and disinfectants are now all locked away, and inmates are no longer permitted to access them to clean their cells. Still, we try to keep it looking neat, even if we're unable to kill the germs, and as you can imagine, it was only a matter of time until disaster struck.

On Friday, March 1, 2013, the medical department here at the CMC decided to place my entire quad on "quarantine." Turns out that a small, cramped and overcrowded environment, combined with a lack of cleaning tools and disinfectants allows infectious diseases like the flu, the norovirus and the cold to spread like wildfire. At first, it was only a few guys on quarantine, but as time passed, the numbers grew to such proportions, that the entire quad was placed on "quarantine." Who would have thought?

And if you're wondering why I'm using the quotation marks around the word "quarantine" when discussing the quad's quarantine versus the individual quarantine, there's a simple explanation. Individuals on quarantine are confined to their cells, where meals and medications are delivered to them, while the remainder of the quad is simply locked in their cells all day long, coming out to get their medication and eat meals together. How, pray tell, is that a quarantine? The whole purpose of a quarantine is to keep people separated, and unable to spread whatever it is they have.

What really saddens me though, is the fact that they continue to take, in this case, our ability to keep ourselves clean. What makes this even worse is the fact that this is a medical facility, where people who are sick are sent to recover or die, sometimes both. There are literally hundreds of people in here who have compromised immune systems, either from cancer or an auto-immune disease, HIV or Valley Fever, making a failure to have access to cleaning supplies a potentially life threatening issue.

Ironically, the first thing the prison did upon placing the quad on quarantine was to send over some bleach, which was then sprayed on all common areas, but not in the inmates' cells. I suspect that the only reason this happened was because they were concerned with catching it themselves and taking it home to their family.

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