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Sasha Borissenko: An ode to New Zealand prisons' Slushiegate



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Slushies can cool you down during summer. Image / 123rf

It's April 2019, and thanks to an Official Information Act request, the Ministry of Corrections [revealed](#) it purchased 193 slushy ice machines for staff across 16 sites over the summer of 2017 and 2018.

Twenty-six of them were placed in Rimutaka Prison, and 20 in Mt Eden. The exercise, which was an attempt to counter significant discomfort for staff induced by a record-breaking heatwave, amounted to more than \$1million of taxpayer money. The move gave another meaning to the term, "slush fund".

The National Party was livid. Fat-phobic sympathisers screamed bloody murder citing sugary drinks were contributing to the obesity epidemic. The scandal even reached The Guardian, where the ministry was quoted as saying sugary frozen drinks were more effective at keeping staff cool than chilled water.

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Backlash ensued. Kelvin Davis supported the measure, telling RNZ it was a disgrace that Simon Bridges was trying to politicise staff health and safety.

"This is nothing like the last National Government spending \$26 million on a flag referendum or hundreds of thousands on a single TV screen, reception desk and hair straighteners. This is about looking after our people and making sure they're able to perform well - and I make no apologies for it," Davis said. Meow, meow.

As it turns out, the drinks were not in fact high in sugar, and thus were not contributing to the "obesity epidemic". Prejudiced people could therefore get a better night's sleep knowing the move wasn't causing a significant strain on the health system.

At the time, PSA organiser Willie Cochrane said the decision to purchase the machines was informed by research findings showing machines were the quickest way to reduce core body temperatures. Military and Veterans' Health data dating back to 2012 found crushed ice was a useful way to prevent heat stroke, for example.

"The idea of the slushies as confectionery or luxury treats is completely incorrect; they are a crushed ice mixture flavoured with electrolyte replacement mixtures," he said.

"This was a one-off purchase that will be able to provide ongoing benefits for many years."

Three years on, if you, like me, are obsessed with the saga, one must ask: Whatever happened to the cooling contraptions, and more importantly, do slushies end with an "ie", or a "y"?

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Where art thou long lost slushy machines?

Corrections acting deputy national commissioner Leigh Marsh says they do not collate the numbers of crushed ice machines still in operation in the prison network in a central database. Their use is at the discretion of each prison director.

"Research shows that the machines offer an immediate and effective means of significantly reducing core body temperature in most situations, up to three times more effective when compared to drinking water. The machines offer an ongoing benefit by increasing safety and wellbeing, therefore improving staff performance during extreme hot weather."

Meanwhile, Rimutaka Prison director Viv Whelan says the crushed ice drinks machines are still being used exclusively by staff at Rimutaka Prison in the summer period. Most are in storage during the winter and only used during summer months as part of the site's heat management plan.

Staff have not indicated any issues with heat management during the winter months, she says.

"Feedback from staff over the last couple of summers is that the machines are welcome and helpful in managing the heat. All flavours contain electrolytes and there is a mixture of sugar and sugar-free options."

Other soothing measures have included: ensuring frontline staff can take breaks in a cool location; giving staff water, hand-held fans, and cold flannels to place on the back of their necks; considering opportunities to increase prisoners' time out of their cells and giving them increased access to cold showers; and ensuring staff are aware of the signs of heat exhaustion and dehydration.

As an aside, in May a Rimutaka prisoner went on a 30-day hunger strike in a bid to get a New Zealand constitution order to restore the mana of the Treaty of Waitangi. While refusing food, staff provided electrolyte packets (which were added to water) to the man under the supervision of the prison health professionals, Whelan said.

She confirmed the electrolyte mixture was not in the form of a slushy.

Sasha Borissenko is a freelance journalist who has reported extensively on the law industry.