

Action to prevent Siu Lam suicides

By HEDLEY THOMAS

ACTION is being taken to halt the high suicide rate at Siu Lam Psychiatric Centre by getting more officers with psychiatric training.

Correctional Services Department (CSD) chiefs hope recommendations in a report now with the Security Branch will satisfy legislators and nurses who have criticised staffing levels at the Centre.

Government sources said yesterday the number of officers with psychiatric nursing qualifications would be more than doubled to about 95, in an effort to drive down the suicide rate.

The report, expected to be released this week, recommends direct recruitment of more staff with nursing qualifications and stepping up psychiatric training for existing officers.

Upgraded training will inevitably drain officers from other prisons which are now understaffed. The

report warns the measures cannot be achieved "overnight".

An examination by the *South China Morning Post* of records of suicide attempts reveals prisoners in Siu Lam are three times more likely to die than those in other Hong Kong prisons.

The suicide last Friday of Wong Kwan-tai, serving life imprisonment for chopping a woman and stuffing the pieces into a kitchen stove 19 years ago, was the fourth at Siu Lam during 1994.

The four suicides and seven attempts, believed to be the highest for a single CSD facility, came during a year in which officers at Siu Lam accused management of not maintaining adequate levels of qualified staff.

The number of suicides totalled three from about 30 attempts throughout the rest of the CSD's institutions in 1994, according to the department's own figures.

"We look out for suicidal tendencies, but we cannot

keep an eye on them all the time," a department spokesman said.

"If a prisoner is determined to die, there are many ways he may commit suicide. We do not agree the suicide cases are due to a lack of staff with psychiatric nursing qualifications."

A band of Siu Lam officer-nurses, who took their case to legislator Michael Ho Mun-ka, said the use of unqualified personnel was jeopardising the lives and well-being of inmates as well as damaging the department's reputation.

Wong, sentenced to death in the mid 1970s, was recently transferred from Stanley Prison to Siu Lam for a routine psychiatric assessment.

On the day before New Year's Eve, he told Siu Lam officers he needed to go to the toilet but, after he did not return, a search found him hanging by his trouser cord from a water faucet.

In an inquest into an earlier suicide at Siu Lam, Coroner Ian Carlson urged a full review of staffing levels after hearing evidence there were only three nurses to look after 50 patients.

The report, by a group including CSD Assistant Commissioner Kelvin Pang Sung-yuen, Senior Superintendent Bailey Shek Lui and Deputy Secretary for Health and Welfare Shelley Lau Lee Lai-kuen, will go to legislators soon.