

SUICIDE IN MODERN IRELAND NEW DIMENSIONS, NEW RESPONSES

Questions & Answers SUICIDAL IRELAND: A FUTURE? Sunday Morning 14 November 2004

In the Chair: **Olivia O'Leary** / Journalist, Author & Broadcaster

Second Speaker: Prof Kevin Malone / SVUH, UCD & 3Ts

Olivia O'Leary: Our second speaker this morning is Kevin Malone who is the head of Department of Psychiatry and Mental Health Research in St Vincent's University Hospital and UCD and clinical investigator at the Conway Institute for Biomolecular & Biomedicine Research in UCD. Kevin has published over 60 research papers on Suicide and belongs to a number of bodies investigating suicide.

Kevin Malone: Good morning and thank you all for showing up again this morning. Its hard to believe really that you would want but it is fantastic that you have done so in numbers and in fact there are still some people in the creative art studio doing their creative arts bit. So it is a full house again which is really pretty amazing.

People liked some of what I presented yesterday which I called "Ireland's Call", coincidentally with the game that was on. I am really going to do an abbreviated version of that between now and ten o'clock, just to bring you up to date, not with regard to sixty kinds of papers or whatever but with regard to our, I guess as far as the 3T's is concerned, you know as I said yesterday, we want to do what we say on tin. We have no other agenda and that is to Turn the Tide of Suicide in Ireland. We are going to try and do that as effectively and as strategically and as inter-departmentally, "inter-voluntarily agency" as we can.

Very briefly just to remind some of you who may not have got to all of the presentations yesterday. I thought they were all key presentations, I have an incredible high standard of presentations. We really wanted to get some new information, new knowledge, bring different people into the debate that wouldn't necessarily routinely be included in a conference, if you like, on suicide in modern Ireland. So we pulled in an unusual group of people and there are a couple of key presentations that I want to remind you of, because we decided to front the conference with a lot of information and then use yesterday to step back and to reflect on different components and different aspects, to give people the opportunity to discuss, to reflect, to absorb.

Yesterday morning John Lonergan as you know stood here without any notes and absolutely held the audience in the palm of his hand as he spoke in a very human and compassionate way about humans and the human condition. He has so nuggets but something that stood out for me was the notion that we are obsessed with success and our tolerance for failure has gone or has diminished.

I think Derek Chamber's point that when our life's are wretched and we had nothing we really held on to life which is a very interesting observation.

John Mann made the point that conferences are useless unless you do something and you know, with his this little beady eye he was definitely casting it over the audience and there was clear message beneath the lines there, not that we needed the message and I assured him of that, but the clear message was unless you continue to something then talking shops are absolutely useless and that is part of the mission of 3Ts, if you like.

Now Eadbhard O'Callaghan stood here and first of all disarmingly told us all that he had a social phobia and a fear of public speaking. He then went on to deliver a most eloquent presentation of a beautiful scientific, very scientifically sound series of studies that have been done in Ireland with regard to early intervention projects in the treatment of psychosis; the toxic effects of duration of untreated psychosis and the economic burden that it brings on society as well as the social burden that it brings on families and the grief and difficulties it brings for individuals. He also outlined that those data had been, if you like cut and pasted into the Norwegian Action Plan for Early Intervention in the Treatment of Psychosis and has been funded fully, because they value their community, they value their people and they value the importance of properly treating mental health. In his own very shy way he was making a very, very, very important point that we have this opportunity in Ireland to make a significant leap forward with regard to the delivery of proper mental health service for people with major psychiatric illness and why that is not being funded. He was saying you have got to start knocking down the doors. I made the point yesterday and I'll make it again today, what is the matter with an uprising? What is the matter with people from mental health services, users and advocacy groups getting together, knocking down the doors and actually bucking the notion that there are no votes in mental health. There are no votes in mental health because we don't have the force of advocacy groups. Politicians generally don't listen to experts or scientists but they certainly listen to the people who are likely to vote for them.

So I firmly believe that a project such as Eadbhard's which has clear scientific value should be funded and should be funded now and of course the problem is that it is going to need to be funded all over the country too, but it is no less than the country deserves. We have really suffered the effects of major psychiatric illness and we have not served our patients with major psychiatric illness well over the last 50 years. In fact, we have served them appallingly and I think the time has now come to do something about that. That is not indirectly related to the problem of suicide because it is directly related to the problem of caring. In Sean McCarthy's presentation, one of young people made the quote "I didn't want them to care". The reality is that if we can get the message across that people do care, it changes society in a very different way and that is very important.

Carol Fitzpatrick presented data on the importance of talking to young people and how young people can help one another. I think that that is going on at the moment anyway. I think that there is a whole underground movement with regard to young people and how they are helping each other. They are saying that the older generation have made a mess of it and so there is a lot of informal support in the underground of young people and I think we have got to try and tap into that and understand it.

Helen Keeley presented some very important new data with regard to deliberate self-harm trends, a fantastic survey of almost 4000 young people where astonishingly 10% of them acknowledged that they had made an act of deliberate self-harm and that 50% had made more than one. From how she was presenting the data, it certainly sounds like there might be cluster effects, there might be a whole incubation of suicides amongst certain sub-cultures within our society and really we have got to get to the bottom of those and get to the bottom of them quickly.

At 3Ts, Turning the Tide of Suicide, we have a very clear message. We want to work on awareness, education, research and support. We want to be inclusive and anybody who is willing to help, we need to get their help. We need sustained action and we need an urgent response. We are certainly of the notion that it is a "can do, will do, do it now" situation. I like that quote. I know it is from a colleague of mine and I don't necessarily agree with everything that she put out in her report (The Brennan Report) but I do think that it is important that we don't just talk, that we actually believe that we can do it and we go on to do it.

I mentioned a lot of the charities that were involved in setting up the 3Ts and those who we are actively supporting at the moment. This is just a model, a symbol of a message that people care. We're sorry, but hold on a moment, people do care and there is a caring element in Irish society. We just need to tap into it. Padraig Harrington has certainly been willing to step up to that. I mention this not because we put together a golf tournament and not because I think that golf is the answer to suicide in Ireland, the important point is that this year 10,000 took part in that golf event all over Ireland, organised by none other than the great Joe MacAvin, well done Joe. But it is a major achievement in itself when you start getting into the politics of golf clubs. 10,000 people from all over the country, over 110 golf clubs, took part in a Turning the Tide of Suicide Golf Tournament. That tells us that at least we are getting in at a new level, introducing the topic to a whole new group of people.

We had over 250 people here for the night that Kay Jamison came here and talked about her experiences of depression and overcoming depression and she is one of several models of a point that John Mann made in his presentation on Friday evening, which he really needed to put together a specific talk called "Second Chance", because Kay Jamison was one of the people who suffered suicidal depression, a serious suicide attempt, got very good clinical help and has gone on with her second chance to make an enormous contribution to science, to society, to people with suicidal depression and any of you who have not read her book called "An Unquiet Mind", I strongly suggest that you do so.

On a more local level, we heard Theresa Millea yesterday tell her story. She was a lady who got a second chance and has made such an enormous contribution to the debate with regard to suicide in modern Ireland and I suppose our argument is that everybody deserves a second chance.

Jimmy Magee stepped up to the plate and put together his video "The Great Sporting Moments", with some of the royalties coming back to the 3T's. We helped him with his launch and as I reminded you yesterday this is going on sale shortly. Don't forget for Christmas presents, it is a wonderful video and some of the royalties come to the 3T's.

We set up a website and really the one word that you need to see there is help. Because what we want to do is help and we want to get as much as we can to do that.

Some of you who were at the Candle Light Vigil that again Mr. Joe MacAvin organised with Lise Alford in the forecourt of the Bank of Ireland in College Green on September 10th 2004 and it is certainly something that we hope to repeat. It was a very important compelling, powerful acknowledgement, a sincere moment, an hour, where almost 300 people were there. It was a very private moment for those 300 people. There were people there who had not spoken about the person they had lost to suicide in maybe thirty years, had never mentioned it to anybody and who came over to me silently afterwards and said "I just wanted to be here. There was a girl who had lost three of her friends to suicide in the previous six months, a boyfriend and two friends. So there were all kinds of people from all walks of life that just walked into the Bank of Ireland in College on that night and they were there for one purpose: a sort of sense of acknowledgement, that those lives were important, that they were remembered. You know that all the buses were screaming by and people were looking out the windows and wondering what was going on and so it was an important awareness from a society point of view, even though it was a very, very private moment for those people who were at that gathering.

Very briefly I talked about the study that we did reaching out to young people with suicidal depression, where we went and talked to people who had been in suicidal crisis six months earlier, had been in our emergency department and we wanted to find out how they got on and what they thought of what we did. They said at the time that what they really needed they felt looking back after six months was someone to talk to face to

face. With regard to our A&E Service, it was hit and miss. Sometimes they got someone who really knew something about counselling and suicidal crisis, other times they got people who threw their eyes up to heaven and said not another one, here we go again, or words to that effect, that sort of generic random response. I think whether you send someone to a general practitioner or to an A&E Department, there has got to be a certain standard of response that you are going expect and that has got to be a high standard, that people are going to have some training at the front coalface and that when you say advise someone go to their A&E Department or to their GP you know that that person has had some training.

The young people thought that there should be special services for them and I think that particularly refers to this ridiculous notion we have where there is a cut-off of child services, somewhere around 16 yrs. Then there is the grey zone between 16 yrs and 18 yrs that the child and adolescence services cannot wait for them to get to 18 yrs and the adult services are dreading the fact that they are going to become 18 yrs. They are a terribly forgotten group and they are a terribly neglected group. I presented data in Salzburg which was a meeting earlier this year and people could not believe it that we had eight dedicated adolescent beds in the country, eight for the whole country, for adolescents in suicidal crisis, specifically dedicated. It is an unbelievable gap in our services.

Young people thought that they should be included in the service and I thought that was a nice model and I think that taps into this connectivity that young people have with one another and they want to feel that sense of connection. It is important for them to connect up the generations obviously and I think they need to be able to connect across the generations and hear from people who had been through it and out the other side. That seemed to be important to them and obviously our conclusion is that young people's views need to be heard. I know that sounds a bit simplistic.

I am going to move onto the final proposal that I suggested yesterday and this is really got to do with the notion that Derek mentioned a little earlier and that I talked about yesterday. We are bogged down in statistics. We have this terrible number for example in 2003, 444 people died by suicide, but really at the moment they are just numbers. They are body bags, they are people in graves. We know very, very little about them. We don't know anything about their lives, their living histories, their stories and to really understand the culture of suicide in Modern Ireland, we have got to get beyond the numbers and into the stories of those who have died by suicide so that we can really understand the problem and once we understand it, obviously we are going to be in a much better position with regard to the delivery of services. To understand, you have got to understand the myths and the realities. Maybe there are 1,000 different reasons why a 1,000 young people kill themselves but maybe there are 150 common reasons and we are not picking those up.

So in summary, over 1,600 deaths in Ireland by suicide since the year 2000. So there is this enormous knowledge gap and we really do not know about the people behind the statistics. So we are proposing a suicide survey where we go around the country with trained interviewers and into peoples homes if they invite us in, into local offices if they do not want us to come to their homes. But we will be asking them to donate a very, very precious piece of themselves that will help Ireland. We have this jigsaw where all these suicides are happening all over Ireland and we have to really try and join up the dots and understand the people in their community behind the story, behind the numbers. And that way we are going to, as I say,

- 4 Interviewers
- 1000 Lives
- 3T's
- 1 Mission - to help us to help Ireland Turn the Tide of Suicide

Thank you.