

SUICIDE IN MODERN IRELAND
NEW DIMENSIONS, NEW RESPONSES

The Adolescent Dimension

Saturday Afternoon 13 November

ALCOHOL IN TEENAGE IRELAND

Presented by: **Mr Joe Connolly**
Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA)

In the Chair: **Fiona McNicholas**, Crumlin Children's Hospital

Fiona McNicholas: My next speaker is Mr Joe Connolly. I am somebody who has no knowledge of sports but Mr Connolly was a former All-Ireland winning Captain in Galway in 1980 and has been involved obviously in the GAA for many years. Through that really he was involved as the Chairman of the Taskforce that looked at the whole issue of underage drinking and substance misuse in terms of what was the level of problems, why were children getting involved in it and then thinking about what could the GAA or society or different groups do to help deal with that problem. He also, I suppose, has expertise in terms of he has five sons aged between 16 & 25yrs, so very much at the age when there is peer pressure, exposure to alcohol and substance and I suppose some exposure to GAA in terms of hurling and all the positive side of the sport. Welcome.

Joe Connolly: We GAA people always stay in the back. Thanks for the opportunity to talk today at this extraordinarily important initiative which has been undertaken by 3Ts and the fantastic work that they are about. My name is Joe Connolly. I don't have a formal qualification like the other speakers and I hope that you bear with my inadequacies or whatever for that reason. But I am father of five sons from 16yrs to 25yrs, one of whom became a father himself two weeks ago. I am now a granddad, so I have an either bigger interest in the future.

I never overestimate what I might say at events like this and I would certainly hold that in no uncertain terms. We do a lot of fundraising for Goal, a lot of us in Galway and about 10 years ago, one of the National Schools in Galway raised about £3,000-£4,000 during the Somalian crisis. I went into accept the cheque on behalf of Goal. The whole of the school was gathered for this, around 400 youngsters aged from 6 yrs to about 12 yrs. The person who introduced me to the group said that I was on the Galway hurling team that beat his Co Limerick team in 1980 in the All-Ireland and he shouldn't really be nice to me but here I was anyway. So I spoke for about 10 or 15 minutes about Somalia, and the starving children and the murders and they really were looking up in awe and you feel you have them in the palm of your hand but at the end of the talk, the teacher asked if there were any questions. A little 6 yr old boy stuck up his hand and asked "what was the score in the match". Since then I have never over-estimated the power of my speaking anyway.

As regards underage drinking, it is, I think, the biggest problem facing Ireland. I really believe it. Again, I have first hand knowledge. A few years ago I was managing an under-16 team, my own club, Castlegar, just outside Galway City. I made this fellow captain, Michael. I knew he was drinking but we were saying before the first game and during the first training session "You are the Man, you are the leader of this under 16 team, when we need a solo run, when we need a goal scored you are the man" and talked him up. But I asked him about all the drinking he was doing and he said that he had been talking to all the rest of the lads on the team and they were all getting off it - which was more associated with a Junior C Hurling Team that's in a County Final, so this hit me in the eye that this the problem. I know another story in rural Galway of an under 16 hurling team that qualified for a County Quarter Final on a Monday night and played an awful bad game, so bad that the manager wouldn't let them out until he found out why they were as bad as they were. He found out that eleven of the fifteen had been drinking on the Sunday night.

Irish Drinking Habits

So we don't need mad statistics here. I don't have to give you mad statistics to say there is a crisis in Ireland of under-age drinking. If we do need statistics, the consumption in the last 10 years has gone up by about 41%. Of 15-17 yr olds, 50% are regular drinkers, with a lot of drug

use involved. For every 100 times that Irish man drinks, he binge drinks. The European idea of binge drinking is 4 pints and I suppose if you are talking about the Irish man, at 4 pints they are only starting their drinking, never mind the binge drinking. That is the equivalent of a bottle of wine or 7 units of alcohol. 30% of female drinking is binge drinking. The trouble that goes with it, the intoxication in a public place among youngsters has increased in the last 5 years by 245% but we adults are really showing a fantastic example because ours has only increased by 194% in the same 5 years.

The worst thing about under age drinking and the way it has evolved in Ireland over the last 5 – 10 years is that it has risen unchallenged by society. As a society, we drink, so this stupid talk that we sometimes do among ourselves "By Jaysus, we wouldn't do that in our time" is a load of rubbish, because if we had the chances in our time that they have now or if the same parameters were around the drinking or the culture of Ireland, we would be doing the same thing.

During the Taskforce we had in the GAA, we heard some fantastic speakers who came in to talk to us. Among the Taskforce was John Lonergan, Governor of Mountjoy, who spoke here this morning – a seriously wonderful guy, who made a huge contribution for hauling out the bull that some of us were talking around the subject. He just absolutely made sure that we never veered off the main issue.

Why are 14-15 yr olds drinking as much as they do?

Among the reasons were that the Irish 15 yr old is reaching a level of maturity now that would have left us a mile behind. For instance, when I was 15/16 yrs, if even somebody from Dublin came to Galway, we weren't even at the races with them in terms of cop-on and maturity, not to mind our cousins who used to come from UK or America. They left us a mile behind. Now the Irish 15 yr old is as copped-on or as mature as anybody anywhere in the world. So reaching maturity – "I'm 15. I'm mature. What am I going to do to show my maturity? I'm going to do what every adult does, I'm going drinking". So it is a serious reason why this problem is upon us.

The second reason is the old certainties of the old Ireland, of maybe church and parental control is not there anymore in the way it was. For whatever the reason, the solidity of perhaps the parenthood of our era and the church and the school principal is not there now. So that is another reason for it.

A report to the Taoiseach's office in the last year or two showed a significant amount of Irish school children were spending as much time in part time work during the week as they were in the classroom and obviously they have money, and Mum never gets the money that they get. It is spent on themselves and a significant amount of that is spent on alcohol and a good time.

There is obviously a serious almost explosion of things being thrown at our youngsters through the medium of television and advertising, including by the drinks industry. Some of the concoctions of drink that they drink are horrendous to look at them but the concoctions together make an awful drink. There is even a drink that I witnessed for the first time at a wedding a week or two ago called the Baby Guinness, which is a small shot glass of Tia Maria with Baileys floating on the top to look like a miniature Guinness. In our time, if we were drinking pints, we usually knew where we were at and where we passed the excess point and we all became studs (or not studs as was more often the case!) and all the rest of it. However, that's not the case now with the concoctions that are being drunk. But the advertising and the slickness of it and the smartness of it – "Come on, be cool, be a boozer" it's very hard for them.

It is also part of the excess of the new Ireland. Everything in Ireland is excess now. I know a builder in Galway that by June had got his third 04 car this year. I think in Galway there is a 25 strong waiting list for helicopters. We look at our next generation coming up and tell them not to be excessive with their drinking, yet what do they see all around them?

Perhaps the thing that we should not overlook either for the youngsters and their drinking is that they love each others company and that is great but unfortunately an excess of alcohol has become a norm within that enjoyment of each other's company. So they are not bad people by any means; they are not lunatics for doing what their group or their peers are doing. So we might as well cop on to the fact that they love each other's company and that is why a lot of what is going on is going on.

GAA Initiative

The initiative that the GAA is about to embark on is, I think, a serious chance of really making a dent on that almost unstoppable progression. We are at least doing initiatives now to stop the

madness. When whole parishes in the West were being decimated in the '50's and '60's by emigration, the great journalist from Mayo, John Healy, came out with the famous line "Why didn't anybody shout Stop?" At least Ireland is now shouting or starting to shout that we have to stop this madness, that within a year or two of our children leaving National School, becoming pissed becomes the norm within their lifestyle. We have to stop accepting it and start challenging that as being the norm, because youngsters should really get their teeth from running around and having craic and having fun and not having chemicals give them that kick. The GAA is very unique as an organisation in Ireland, in fact it is unique worldwide. The GAA has a place in every parish in Ireland, a GAA Club and I always thought and I have thought for a long time that the infrastructure is there already within the GAA as regards clubs in every parish in Ireland – 2000 clubs. If the GAA, as the biggest sports organisation in Ireland really threw its might behind the initiative that the potential at the far end of it could be considerable.

A few years ago on New Years Eve, at the age of 15 yrs the best young player of a club in rural Galway was found unconscious from drink and it frightened the life out of them. I was asked out to a meeting with the local garda and the local doctor in the local hall because they knew I had an interest in it and I had played at the top level. Some of what the doctor and garda were saying to the parents down there was just frightening the life out of them. One nightclub kept being mentioned as a place where the youngsters got the drink. It's too easy to blame the publicans but as far as I remember only about 20% of the excess alcohol or the drunkenness comes from. The other 80% is from other methods such as taking it out of houses, getting it in off-licences etc. But this one nightclub was continually mentioned as the place where the youngsters got their drink and it was a wonderful source of information to this community in this part of Ireland that this is a danger-spot. My other brother's wife accidentally a month or two later when we were talking about under age drinking said that thank goodness her daughter does not go into Galway to the nightclubs, she goes to this very nice nightclub and mentioned the nightclub that had everyone had mentioned. Well, I had to break the news to her! But it was a great piece of information to have.

The GAA masterplan is that there be an alcohol and drugs awareness officer appointed in Croke Park full time, no other responsibilities. Within 6-12 months there will be a roll-out of 32 county officers, an alcohol and drugs awareness officer in every county, chosen, not somebody volunteering at a county convention, but somebody carefully chosen. Then a roll-out from that in the following 12 months that there will be an alcohol and drugs awareness officer in every club in the country, just as every GAA club has a chairman, secretary, treasurer etc, there is going to be an alcohol and drugs awareness officer. That person's job will be to implement the template that the GAA has put together. They don't have to go knocking on doors and saying "Your Johnny is drinking", nothing like that, just be the person at local level who will implement the carefully researched and well planned initiative of the GAA. They will be two-pronged at local level:

1. Towards parents and guardians, because it is bewildered parents who can't understand that it is their beautiful 12 yr old who comes out of National School is 2 or 3 years later turning out to be this person.
2. We will also have an initiative to talk to the youngsters themselves in their own language. That is not to say that if they drink now they will have a damaged liver at 38 yrs. You might as well be talking about going up to the moon. But what we will be talking to them about is that if they drink on Tuesday, how their performance is effected next Sunday. Hopefully the graphics and the video and the five minutes sharp presentation, internet, texting and all that, the media that youngsters can relate to, will tell them the immediate damage that it is doing.

I really believe that for the younger generation that this culture has risen unchallenged and they will now have a reason to tell their buddies "I don't want to drink; I want to be a sportsman; I want to be good at hurling or football" and there is no reason in the world why this cannot be attempted for rugby or soccer and for every sport to come in and do so in the next few years. Now they will have a reason, to point at a video and to say "If I drink, this is what it is doing to my body". For the first time ever, there will be a support mechanism that will really give them a great chance of saying no. The best hurlers and footballers such as DJ Carey, Sean Og O'Halpin and those don't drink at all. I think it is a message now that we are almost embarrassed to say to youngsters not to drink at all, to wait till they are 18, 19 or 20yrs. We feel almost reluctant as parents to say that to them. But our heroes who have achieved fantastic deeds or even those who drink moderately such as Brian O'Driscoll or anybody who does great jobs in the other sports can say "Alright, drink if you have to but just take it easy; this is the damage it is doing". I think it would be invaluable for starting the fight and the shouting and the shouting no.

There is a culture. For instance, youngsters don't drink and drive like we stupidly did. It is not in their culture, so there are a lot of sensibilities about them. I really believe that the No Smoking culture in pubs is going to reduce the amount of alcohol that is going to be consumed anyway, which is great. So there is a momentum in Ireland.

The excess has to stop. We will drive ourselves crazy as a country if we read in one more article in one more paper that we are Europe's boozers. My father at 85 yrs on his birth cert he couldn't write his name in Irish on his birth cert because it wasn't an Irish state at that time and it is an awful insult, I think, to the forefathers behind us if our generation is the generation that lets our kids become boozers and pissers and messers and drug abusers without doing something solidly and determinedly and organised for them.

I don't have an awful lot more to say beyond that. I really believe that this GAA initiative will really work because speaking to Sean O'Ceallaigh, the President of the GAA, they want to throw everything at it. Within the age group that we are talking about, 15-16 years, of 2000 clubs, there is at least 100,000 members there and they will be told that it isn't a good idea to become the boozers, even if your friends are, you don't have to be. I really believe that this initiative has a great chance of working but at least, at long last and thankfully, Ireland is waking up to the crisis that will be there unless we really really do something about it.

Go raibh maith agaibh.

Fiona McNicholas: Thank you very much Joe.