



The College of Psychiatry of Ireland
Coláiste Síciatrachta na hÉireann

Press Release - 27th January 2012

Out of sight, out of mind? Homelessness and Mental Health

Psychiatrists in Ireland call for specialised services and a co-ordinated approach for homeless citizens with serious mental health difficulties at the College of Psychiatry AGM today, Friday 27th January. Speaking at the College's AGM, Dr Joanne Fenton, a consultant psychiatrist who works with homeless people, said the true prevalence of mental health problems in the homeless population is unknown but that estimates show that up to one in four homeless people can have severe mental health issues.

Homeless people find it difficult to access the health and social care they need and face barriers, such as lack of finances, lack of understanding of state entitlements and stigma, in having their needs met. *"Their issues and mental health problems are exacerbated because, having no fixed address they are so focussed on getting a bed for the night and basic necessities that they often neglect their mental health & wellbeing"* said Dr Fenton who is part of a team which includes a social worker & two nurses who go out to hostels, in early morning and late at night, to provide assistance and care to homeless people in these circumstances.

In Dublin alone there are approximately 2,366 homeless people with an estimated 5,000 people homeless nationally. Referring to her everyday experience working in an outreach team for the homeless mentally ill in Dublin city centre, Dr Fenton continued *"I work in an outreach service and see every day the value of working closely with housing authorities and health professionals to speak out for this group and improve their quality of life. When there is a co-ordinated response to care there is an overall positive impact for our patients. The College is calling for this outreach service to be strengthened and co-ordinated throughout Ireland"*

Drawing on the 'A Vision for Change' document (expert blueprint document on how our national Mental Health Services should be set up), the College of Psychiatry's 6th anniversary paper *Specialist Mental Health Services for the Homeless* makes three key recommendations:

- Invest in assertive outreach Community Mental Health Teams and Rehabilitation Teams
- Develop & implement a timed plan with adequate resources for developing Mental Health Services for homeless people in each region
- Establish a Crisis Unit in Dublin

"In the current economic climate those at the margins of society are at greatest risk of losing vital services. Our homeless people are no exception, especially our homeless people with mental health problems. We are increasingly concerned about the welfare of this group of people" says Dr Fenton.

“A Vision for Change clearly outlines how this group’s mental health issues should be served. The fact that the recommendations haven’t been implemented is of great concern particularly in light of the overall cuts and cuts to Rehabilitation teams.

There is a high rate of mental illness and substance misuse among the homeless population whose needs require a team approach to care, that team consisting of professionals such as social workers, GPs, Psychologists, Nurses, Occupational Therapists and Psychiatrists.

Homelessness can contribute to mental illness and for a minority of those with mental illness, the illness can lead to homelessness therefore both health and housing need to be addressed in tandem” explained Dr Fenton.

The College urge that the recommendations as outlined in ‘A Vision for Change’ and their position paper ‘Specialist Mental Health Services for the Homeless’ are implemented and that the human rights to a home, food & health are addressed for this vulnerable group in our society.

Every year since ‘A Vision for Change’ was published, the College has focussed on certain aspects of its progress (or lack of) particularly for certain vulnerable groups. This year their anniversary paper raises the issue of homelessness and mental health - the focus of the College for 2012 - and calls for key specialist services and a joined up coordinated approach for this marginalised group of people.

Ends

[Click here for the College AGM agenda](#) with speakers listed

and

For the position paper click here - [‘Specialist Mental Health Services for the Homeless’](#)

Contact:

Andrea Ryder
Communications Manager
External Affairs & Policy

The College of Psychiatry of Ireland

5 Herbert Street, Dublin 2

Direct Tel: 01 634 4374/ mobile 087 2697656

email: andrea@irishpsychiatry.ie

College Tel: 01- 661 8450 Fax: 01 - 662 9677

web: www.irishpsychiatry.ie

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