



Mental Health Reform

Promoting Improved Mental Health Services

Opening statement to the Oireachtas Committee on Health

25/05/2021

COVID19 and mental health

COVID-19 is a mental health emergency and a physical health emergency¹. The virus has brought about anxiety in the general population, while public health restrictions and the sudden contraction in our social scope brought isolation and loneliness. Our personal networks and formal support systems were wiped away. The engrained thinking in Ireland is that mental health is hidden out of sight, it is fringed on the edges of our understanding of what health and wellbeing is. This binary thinking is long out of date. The pandemic has demonstrated how physical and mental health are inextricably linked to one other and to our wellbeing.

In late 2020 RTE commissioned important research, 'the next normal' to better understand the effects of the pandemic. Mental health, which had previously not featured, emerged as the 4th most important issue facing Ireland.

Research demonstrates decreased psychological well-being, increased anxiety, depression and stress as common psychological reactions.² In an Irish context a March 2021 Amárach poll, carried out for the Department of Health, reported 36% of people reporting stress, frustration (36%), sadness (29%) and loneliness (24%). These were the highest levels since the survey began. Mental Health is a dominant theme because it is a sharp reality. Research shows that different groups have different risk factors for Covid-19. People with pre-existing mental health difficulties, health care workers, women, young people, people in precarious work, those who are homeless and from ethnic minority groups and health care workers are more likely to be negatively impacted by COVID-19. When it comes to the effects of the pandemic on mental health, we are not all in this together.

Our member organisations, several of whom have appeared before the Oireachtas Sub Committee on Mental Health, have witnessed an increase in those seeking support.

¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7471570/>

² Rajkumar, R.P. (2020). COVID-19 and mental health: A review of the existing literature. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 52, p.1-5. doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102066

² Vindegaard, N. & Bernos, M.E. (2020). COVID-19 pandemic and mental health consequences: Systematic review of the current evidence. *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity*. doi.org/10.1016/j.bbi.2020.05.048

Our mental health system was and is not capable of coping with a surge. Our system was struggling and close to breaking point long before the pandemic hit. When the tide went out on physical health, the inadequacy of our mental health services was brutally exposed.

Deficits include inadequate staffing, ICT shortfalls and insufficient access to services. COVID-19 underlines the need to reconfigure mental health services. We must put service users at the centre of design and delivery.

Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act

Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act have had a real impact on those with mental health difficulties who are involuntarily detained under the Mental Health Act [- Part 5 as it relates to the Mental Health Act, 2001].

MHR notes that all efforts are and have been made by the Mental Health Commission to ensure minimum impact on the procedural rights of service users. However, the legislation in itself continues to be problematic in its removal of safeguards for service users and its infringements of service user rights under the UNCRPD - such as the right to a tribunal. In particular, the difficulties the legislation presents in some cases, for individuals' ability to tell their story and have their voice heard is an infringement of their human rights..

Due to the considerable time these emergency measures have been in place, and the progress made on vaccinations, we believe that the measures contained in part 5 are no longer necessary. We are now in a very different place to when we first enacted this legislation.

What needs to be done

Ireland urgently requires a mental health service that can meet the challenges of the pandemic and its aftermath. The future of mental health services in Ireland will be shaped by the political action taken now. We urge the government to resource, rebuild and reform our services. In particular;

- *The government must review and repeal Part V of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 to strike a better balance between the need to protect people from COVID-19 and the protection of human rights for those under the act.*
- *Address other human rights gaps by urgently reforming Ireland's Mental Health Act and publish the draft legislation to update the Mental Health Act 2001 to support planning for mental health services towards the future, reassure people and restore confidence that mental health services will protect their rights*

- *Substantially increase investment in our mental health services and supports to address the challenges of the pandemic and its aftermath, and become resilient against future public health crises.*

COVID -19 has laid bare the inadequacy of our mental health services, and their peripheral position within the health system as a whole. The pandemic has offered a non-negotiable opportunity to resource, rebuild and resource our mental health services; we cannot go back to a broken system. Now more than ever we need a fit for purpose, responsive, adequate mental health system in which people can access the care they need when they need it.

Go raibh maith agat