

Speech at Sean O Keefe RIP memorial event

9th of October 2019

Imagine you're walking down the street and you collapse. You're rushed to hospital and diagnosed with a heart failure. But the doctors say

"We can't treat you until your lung problem is sorted and we don't do that sort of thing here"

The Doctors won't treat your heart problem until you're lung problem is sorted.

Anyone think such an approach is crazy?

Yes, this approach would be medical negligence in the physical health care world. We would n't accept it.

Yet, as Sean's tragic death shows this is exactly the approach we take to treating people with an addiction and mental health problem.

Sean's family kept getting turned away from mental health services and told

"Addiction is the only conversation"

Sean's and his family discovered addiction services don't treat any other mental health problems. Mental Health services don't treat addiction.

Yet the psychiatrist's bible of mental health illnesses (called the DSM) states addiction is a mental health issue. That makes sense. Addiction and Mental health problems are two sides of the same coin. For example, the science shows that 85% of people who are dependent on alcohol have an underlying mental health problem¹. This is called a dual diagnosis. So dual diagnosis is the norm in addiction not the exception.

Yet a Government report states 76% of Irish services are **not** designed to treat people with a dual diagnosis.²

This is because Vision for Change the government's policy on mental health services is fundamentally flawed on addiction. Vision for change sees mental health and addiction as two separate problems. So if mental health is the Cinderella of our health services then addiction is the Ugly sister and dual diagnosis... it just does not exist in official Ireland

So now after 10 years of Vision for Change we have a generation of health care professionals who have been trained, brainwashed to believe that addiction and mental health issues are two separate things and must be treated separately. This is despite the fact that all the science shows

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that one, is it is cheaper (better for the tax payer) and two people get better faster by providing an integrated service which treats the whole person.³

But it is not right to solely blame health care professionals who are themselves overworked, over stressed and increasingly suffering from mental health and addiction problems themselves.

We need to look further for the solution and to stop more Sean's dying.

We need to look at the elephant in the room. Stigma.

The late Dara Quigley, who herself struggled with addiction described the impact of stigma on her.

Dara said, it is one of the unseen struggles of recovery from addiction. A constant battle between what you know is true, a desire to make it out the other side, pitted against a society and health care system which views addicts– as moral hazards to be contained and controlled.”⁴

Stigma is so strong despite reports of abuse⁵ in addiction services the Department of Health is still refusing to accept that independent regulation of addiction services is vital

Stigma means we have services which force people to urinate in front of attendants which is in breach of their human right to dignity and respect⁶. We talk about their urine being clean which means if you're using drugs you're dirty. How does this help the Sean's of this world get better?

Stigma means, we don't routinely measure whether services are actually helping rather than making people feel worse. Despite the Controller and Auditor General recommending this in 2009⁷

Stigma means people are told “you did n't work the programme, hard enough” or like Sean simply refused help.

“Nowhere else in medicine is it okay to blame the patient when the treatment doesn't work”⁸

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We don't blame people with cancer when treatment fails so why do we blame people with addictions?

Because nobody, nobody chooses to become addicted and certainly not Sean. Addiction is always about emotional pain. As the singer Christy Dignan says all people with addictions have a psychic wound. So just imagine how it feels to be in pain, to have a psychic wound, look for help and then be turned away.

Imagine your shame when you hear that a Minister in Government just a few miles from here has welcomed not providing health care services you badly need⁹?

We see ourselves through other's eyes. So how can people get better, when society excludes, marginalises, stigmatises them in this way?

Many don't get better. The lucky ones end up in jail¹⁰. But many of them like Sean die.

Yes, we need a change in government policy to deliver "no wrong door"¹¹ with mental health and addiction services integrated, treating people with addictions with dignity and respect and actually measuring whether they are helping or harming people.

But most of all, in the same way we as a society have accepted stigmatising single pregnant women and locking them away in Magdalene homes is wrong. We need to accept that people with addictions need compassion and empathy, inclusion and respect not rejection and shaming as Sean, Yasmin, Stacey, Dara, and Caoilte and so many others suffered and continue to suffer.

And we'll know as a society we've become more "woke" more civilised, more enlightened when people like Sean and families like the O Keeffes don't have to suffer as they are bounced like hot potatoes between services. Because we'll make sure that people with addictions and their families receive the right type of support at the first time of asking.

Thank You

Carol Moore

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We need to look further for the solution and to stop more Sean's dying.

We need to look at the elephant in the room. Stigma.

The late Dara Quigley, who herself struggled with addiction described the impact of stigma on her.

Dara said, it is one of the unseen struggles of recovery from addiction. A constant battle between what you know is true, a desire to make it out the other side, pitted against a society and health care system which views addicts– as moral hazards to be contained and controlled.”⁴

Stigma is so strong despite reports of abuse⁵ in addiction services the Department of Health is still refusing to accept that independent regulation of addiction services is vital

Stigma means we have services which force people to urinate in front of attendants which is in breach of their human right to dignity and respect⁶. We talk about their urine being clean which means if you're using drugs you're dirty. How does this help the Sean's of this world get better?

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Imagine your shame when you hear that a Minister in Government just a few miles from here has welcomed not providing health care services you badly need⁹?

We see ourselves through other's eyes. So how can people get better, when society excludes, marginalises, stigmatises them in this way?

Many don't get better. The lucky ones end up in jail¹⁰. But many of them like Sean die.

Yes, we need a change in government policy to deliver "no wrong door"¹¹ with mental health and addiction services integrated, treating people with addictions with dignity and respect and actually measuring whether they are helping or harming people.

But most of all, in the same way we as a society have accepted stigmatising single pregnant women and locking them away in Magdalene homes is wrong. We need to accept that people with addictions need compassion and empathy, inclusion and respect not rejection and shaming as Sean, Yasmin, Stacey, Dara, and Caoilte and so many others suffered and continue to suffer.

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