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Children in need continue to play the waiting game

By Eilish O'Regan
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Children in need of psychiatric care continue to be poorly served by our health service, despite the fact that the problem has been repeatedly highlighted.

The most up-to-date figures for the numbers of children on waiting lists to see a psychiatrist showed 2,000 faced delays of up to three years. Of these, over 1,500 were waiting for a routine assessment, the Mental Health Commission's census for 2008 found.

It said the majority of children deemed emergencies are seen immediately and priority cases are examined within a year.

A snapshot of waiting times around the country revealed:

- Dublin south-west, north-west and Kildare -- four weeks to a year.
- Dublin south-east, south county Dublin and east Wicklow -- three to 13 months.
- Laois, Offaly, Longford and Westmeath -- three months to one year.
- Louth, Meath, Cavan and Monaghan -- three to nine months.
- Dublin north (Mater hospital) -- one month to a year.
- Galway, Mayo, Roscommon -- up to three years.
- Sligo, Leitrim -- no information.
- Limerick, Clare, north Tipperary -- more than a year.
- Donegal -- more than a year.
- Cork, Kerry -- up to 30 months.
- Waterford, Wexford, Carlow, Kilkenny, south Tipperary -- 25 days to one year.

The report of the inspector of mental hospitals pointed out that it is well documented that children with mental health problems who do not receive appropriate timely therapy are more likely to need psychiatric care later in life.

It pointed out that the HSE is putting more emphasis on providing more hospital beds for this age group than community services. But in the absence of more specialists and other services in the community it is likely that demand for the beds will rise.

According to the Department of Health, there are currently 55 child and adolescent mental health teams in place throughout the country. An additional eight consultant-led child-psychiatry teams to further support the provision of child and adolescent psychiatric services are to be developed. The aim is to increase the number to 69 by the end of 2009.

Asked about progress in providing psychiatric hospital beds for this age group to avoid them having to go to adult units, the department said there are currently 22 child and adolescent beds in the country.

These break down as: 10 in Galway and 12 in Dublin (six in St Vincent's, Fairview; six in Warrenstown).

Construction has started on two 20-bed units in Bessboro, Cork, and Merlin Park, Galway. Construction is scheduled to be completed on both of these developments in late 2009 and the beds commissioned in 2010.

- *Eilish O'Regan*

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