



The College of Psychiatry of Ireland
Coláiste Siciatrachta na hÉireann

Statement from the College of Psychiatry of Ireland, 16 September 2011

RTE Documentary '*Behind the Walls*'

The two part documentary '*Behind the Walls*', broadcast recently on RTE, focussing on psychiatric care and institutions in this country over the past decades dealt with many important issues and provided an overview of a system, which was in so many ways flawed and inadequate. A more objective and balanced series of documentaries would also have focused on the multiple advances in the treatment of mental illness in the last two decades both at Primary Care level by GPs and their teams and at Secondary Care level by specialists in the mental health services. Thousands of patients benefit from these advances and more person focussed contemporary care around the country every year. The vast majority of people in this country, who experience an onset of mental illness, will be treated effectively and will have no recurrence.

For us as psychiatrists and doctors to hear in these programmes the graphic descriptions of women recounting their experiences of sexual abuse by a treating psychiatrist was most shocking and disturbing. The women who spoke out in the programme are to be admired. We welcome the openness which is becoming part of our society in recent years and encourage any investigation that should take place with regard to the alleged incidences. The need for vigilance and regulation of all health professionals particularly those working with vulnerable people was clearly portrayed in the documentary and is necessary now and the future.

The separate issue of how little interest society takes in our mentally ill needs to be addressed. Over the years, and today, Psychiatrists are at the forefront in advocating for improved services for patients. Many of the older members of the College of Psychiatry recall the appalling conditions shown on the programme. In the late 1970's one group of psychiatrists wrote a newspaper article highlighting the appalling conditions in St. Brendan's Hospital, Grangegorman. The response was immediate, with politicians visiting the premises, but the changes were minute. Over the last five years psychiatrists have repeatedly drawn attention to the lack of progress in introducing the recommendations

in *A Vision for Change*, the government blueprint for how a mental health service should work.

There are large parts of the country without the necessary multidisciplinary teams to deliver person centred effective treatments. The budget for the mental health service, as a percentage of the total health budget continues to be cut. Despite these difficulties, there have been great advances in mental healthcare over the last number of years. Advances in neuroimaging have identified how changes occur in the brain, and have shown how effective psychological therapies can be in changing brain chemistry. This has brought about a greater understanding of how the different mental health disciplines can work together in ensuring people recover from mental illness. An individual presenting with symptoms of mental illness today, is most likely to be treated outside of hospital, and if hospital admission is required, in most cases this will be for less than three weeks, and to a ward in a general hospital and in an entirely voluntary capacity. A small group of people who do not respond to various treatments initially require more complex treatments, and *A Vision for Change* supports the use of Social and Rehabilitation Multidisciplinary teams for this group.

Recovery rates from mental illness are better than for any other illness groups. Mental Health Services in Ireland remain poorly organised, resources are allocated unevenly throughout the country and culture & attitudes need to change. There are examples of excellent innovations in mental healthcare throughout the country. These services are provided by dedicated mental health professionals incorporating service user feedback and improvements are encouraged and led by Consultant Psychiatrists.

The College of Psychiatry would welcome a wider debate on mental illness which would include issues such as; service provision, treatments, funding, stigma and the societal attitudes, which are so important in dealing with an illness which impacts, at one time or another, on most families.

Ends

Contact: **Andrea Ryder**, College of Psychiatry of Ireland

5 Herbert Street, Dublin 2

Email: andrea@irishpsychiatry.ie