

Issues of Substance: Our **All-Ireland Conference on Mental Health and Addiction** hosted by the IMO in conjunction with the BMA in Northern Ireland highlighted a number of key challenges facing mental health and addiction services North and South of the border.

In the first session Dr Stephen Thomas highlighted the **impact of recession and austerity on health** systems in Europe with Ireland faring badly in terms of severity and the highest drop in public spending on health in Europe. Households in Ireland have particularly felt the impact of cuts with substantial increases in out-of-pocket payments for care and increasing levels of unmet need. Mr John Saunders and Dr Paul Bell both highlighted the general underfunding of mental health services in Ireland and Northern Ireland with the Chairman of the Mental Health Commission highlighting how effective the Moratorium on Recruitment has been as a cost-cutting measure but how detrimental it has been on man-power planning for mental health reform.

Behavioural Addictions, in particular gambling addiction was the topic of the second session. Former Armagh GAA player Oisín McConville gave a very frank and open account of his struggles with gambling addiction, a dependency which UK studies estimate affects 1% of the population with a further 7% of the population at risk. The second speaker in this session Dr Colin O’Gara explained how the trigger processes, dependence, comorbidity, mutual support and clinical treatment for gambling addiction overlap with drug and alcohol addiction.

After lunch we had three different perspectives on **The Wider Impact of Addiction**. Dr Ann Hope presented her research into the impact of alcohol abuse on children which can lead to children being verbally abused, left in an unsafe situation, witness to serious violence in the home or the child can be physically hurt. Secondary responses such as Children First Guidance has been important in helping to focus on the risks to children but more integration is needed between the agencies central to the supportive environment for children. Action is needed on primary prevention such as minimum unit pricing and restrictions on availability and advertising of alcohol. Father Peter McVerry spoke of the harsh reality and challenges facing a minority of vulnerable people who find themselves both homeless and have a drug addiction. Father McVerry asked *“What is the point in a homeless person giving up drugs?”* if they go through a difficult detox programme emerge drug free and then are given a bed in a dormitory full of drug users, that is if there is one available. *“Unfortunately neither homelessness nor drugs have much political priority with this Government or any previous Government.”* Dr Johnny Connolly spoke of the relationship between drugs and crime and the tensions that exist between the criminal justice system and harm reduction efforts.

In our final session on **Addiction Services in Ireland**, Dr Cathal Ó Súilleabháin explained how community addiction services initially evolved to address the spread of HIV but shifted in the early 1990s to a focus on harm reduction. While drug misuse has spread outside the capital methadone services in Ireland are still concentrated in Dublin and there is considerable stigma attached to drug addiction. Our final speaker Dr Bill Gregg explained that dual diagnosis is an unsatisfactory term and that many patients with substance abuse problems have multiple mental physical co-morbidities. There is a need for closer alignment between physical health, mental health and addiction services as current care pathways fail to address all issues.

Feedback from all the delegates was extremely positive and we’d like to thank our speakers for their excellent presentations.