

'Project for early detection of psychosis should be extended'

Consultant psychiatrist Prof Eadbhard O'Callaghan is leading a project which is attempting to diagnose and treat psychosis in its early stages. He talks to Niamh Mullen about the DETECT and DELTA projects

Psychosis is a major problem in Ireland and each year about 1,000 people develop psychotic disorders. And yet the budget for mental health services is decreasing in real terms, according to Prof Eadbhard O'Callaghan, consultant psychiatrist with the DETECT service in south-east Dublin.

There are huge unnecessary delays in treating psychosis, he says.

"It is not going to go away. We need to think of new ways to deal with it because healthcare costs are just escalating as a proportion of GDP. We need new ways to look at health and how we intervene," he told *IMN* in an interview.

The way the Irish mental health service is set up, it is not designed in the patient's interest, says Prof O'Callaghan. He adds that the reality of the service, in many cases, is that patients are making do with what is being provided.

He believes the proportion of the health budget spent on mental illness is too low, and says: "I think it is a huge investment for the future if you can help people recover quickly. It would reduce acute healthcare costs, increase productivity of the individual, and reduce indirect costs like the time family members give up to mind people."

Psychosis affects 70,000 people in Ireland, with 50 million sufferers worldwide. WHO predicts that by 2010 it will be the second most disabling medical illness after heart disease.

"The one thing you can say about psychosis is that it is fairly democratic. It affects people of all ages, of all backgrounds, all racial groups, and all religions," says Prof O'Callaghan.

Psychotic episodes are more common among the general population than one would think, he adds.

"People say it's only one per cent and the other 99 per cent think we are all right. But psychotic symptoms are very common. Up to one-in-six people will have a psychotic symptom. These people are not so different. They are you and me. The stigma is enormous," he says.



Prof Eadbhard O'Callaghan - There are huge unnecessary delays in treating psychosis in this country. The DETECT service is seeking to address the problem by reducing the duration of untreated psychosis (DUP)

He stresses that everyone in the mental health services wants intervention tailored to the specific needs of the patient, taking into account their age, and mental health services are, he states, using DETECT as "a vehicle for that".

The DELTA project was set up in Dun Laoghaire, Dublin, under the St John of God Lucena Clinic Services in February 2005. It stands for detection, education, and local team assessment. The DETECT service is part of the DELTA service.

It is a new initiative designed to reduce the duration of untreated psychosis (DUP). Research has shown that there is an average delay of one-to-two years in seeking treatment and this delay is linked to an increased risk of suicide.

DETECT is a free service that is part of the existing public mental health services. It is funded on a day-to-day basis by the HSE and St John of God - St John of God provides one-third of the funding, and the HSE provides the other two-thirds.

It works in conjunction with St John of God Lucena Clinic Services, Cluain Mhuire Service, the Elm Mount Unit at St Vincent's University Hospital, and Newcastle Community Health Service, Co Dublin.

St John of God provided seed funding to cover south-east Dublin. Further funding was provided by the HSE to extend the catchment area north towards Dublin City and south towards Arklow.

Around 375,000 people, or 9.3 per cent of the population, are covered by the service, Prof O'Callaghan says.

Everyone affected by psychosis in that geographical area gets a formal assessment by a member of the DETECT team. They assess symptoms and the quality of life of the patient. Patients are referred to DETECT by their GP.

Referrals are dealt with inside 72 hours at most, he says, and some assessments are carried out within a day of the patient being referred.

DETECT is working closely with the ICGP, according to Prof

O'Callaghan. He says the service has had a terrific response from GPs with significant numbers of their patients being referred to it. "GPs want more information and they want pathways removed to give really quick assessments," he says.

After the initial assessment, the patient may be offered further treatments including cognitive behavioural therapy.

DETECT also offers a carer education programme, which is designed to teach family and friends about the causes of psychosis, the treatments available, the symptoms, and how to manage the illness. He says research has shown that these

standing and enables them to act as a sort of co-therapist, he says.

The treatments offered are supplementary to existing treatments, and the series of assessments is designed to help inform the clinical team in the hospital the patient is attending. Ultimate responsibility for care still lies with the clinical team at the hospital they are attending.

Prof O'Callaghan estimates that €50 million would be needed to extend the DETECT service to cover the whole country. This would cover the cost of 10 services that could provide a service to 350,000-to-400,000 people.

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programmes can actually help prevent relapse.

People are not entirely sure how these programmes work, but speculate that empowering the family encourages under-

Each service would cost approximately €5 million per annum.

"It is more cost-effective in the long term and even on a short-term basis. The big difference is

that you can reduce inpatient stays by intervening early, and they are the most costly element," he says. However, he stresses that it is not just about bed days, saying a lifetime of taxes paid by a healthy young person makes an enormous contribution to the economy.

The Association of Child and Adolescent Mental Health (ACAMH), in association with St John of God Lucena Clinic Services, is hosting a major conference on early intervention in psychosis on June 20 and 21, 2006.

"This conference is about trying to preserve function in young people so they can live their life to the full potential before any decline has set in," says Prof O'Callaghan.

The keynote speaker, Prof Pat McGorry, of the University of Melbourne, is an international expert in the field. He received A\$54 million in (Australian) government funding to set up a youth-friendly service called Origins, in conjunction with the University of Melbourne.

He pioneered the early intervention model that DETECT is trying to emulate. "They showed that not only are people less unwell when they come for treatment but they get better outcomes, they are less suicidal and they are less likely to end up detained under legal measures. It also doesn't seem to cost as much," says Prof O'Callaghan.

A similar service in Norway reported success in reducing DUP from 118 weeks to 26 weeks. They linked success with public education campaigns and liaising closely with GPs. DETECT is still in the pilot phase of its programme and similar results would not be available for eight to nine years, he points out.

DETECT has applied to the HSE for funding for the media/public education phase of the programme. The HSE and St John of God will audit DETECT to see if it reduces the length of untreated illness and to assess the outcome of other interventions.

DETECT has already begun to gather data on its results but no hard outcomes are expected for a number of years, he says.