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SUFFER LITTLE CHILDREN – THE SHAME OF CAMHS

By Anne Wall

Many years ago, Whitney Houston sang “I believe the children are our future”. Unfortunately successive Irish governments must never have heard this song or failed to hear the words and what they mean. Children are our future and should be nurtured and protected accordingly. However, a recent damning report by the chief mental health inspector shows that children and young adults are being neglected and falling through the cracks regarding mental health treatment. This report reinforces ongoing accounts of the experiences of staff and family service users of CAMHS.

This report states that CAMHS - in its present form - cannot provide assurance to parents and guardians that their children have access to safe and effect service. Staffing levels fall below those recommended with most centres having staff levels of 50% or less. How can any organization provide a decent service with those levels? Many staff are overworked, burnt out and demoralized, this is leading to a high staff turnover, which leads to all sorts of problems with long waiting times for appointments and later, issues with continuity of care. Staff do their very best, but lack of funding has led to a lack of resources which has led to a service that is not performing to the standard that is very much needed.

The report also found that there is not an uninformed level of services across the country, and it can be a post code lottery as to waiting times and levels of care offered. Some centres can provide many services in bright cheerful surroundings, - while other centres are in old buildings which are not conducive to promoting good mental health. Most centres do not have the basic resources such as up to date IT services, with many centres still using paper files. How can a proper service be provided without the basics needed to do so, such as sufficient staff, decent surroundings and up to date technology?

The waiting times for appointments after referral can vary from centre to centre with the average waiting time to be seen being 3-4 months and in some areas even longer. One frightening revelation was that children presenting to their GP with suicidal thoughts can be waiting up to a month (24 days in most cases) to be seen. Another issue facing young adults being seen by CAMHS is the fact that when they reach 18, they are referred to adult services,

which are stretched as well. This leads to a break in the continuity of care. A way around this would be to extend the care age within CAMHS to 25, which would ensure that the all-important continuity of care would continue as needed.

It is well known that many mental issues that affect adults can be traced back to childhood and early intervention can help alleviate these issues. Good mental health is needed for a person to function well in society, as well as in their personal and work lives. Increasing funding to CAMHS and other organisations that work with children and young people is an investment into a society that will function well into the future. Ignoring this fact will only lead to more serious societal problems going forward.

Of course, there are some that can bypass CAMHS and access care independently, those who can afford to see private consultant psychiatrists and other professionals that deal with mental health issues. A two-tier system that once again lets the working class down. This is why we need a decent health service which delivers all levels of care whether it be for mental or physical health, based on need not on financial advantages.

The report has made 49 recommendations, it is to be hoped that most, if not all, of these are acted upon without delay. The children are our future. We owe it to them to give them the best chance of becoming strong adults, able to function well with confidence, to become the best that they can be, and to have a good role in society.

The RED Network (incorporating Rebel Telly) are a network of radical socialists within the political party People Before Profit, a 32-county people power movement on the island of Ireland.

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