

# DETECT for Psychosis in Wicklow

By Dr Stephen McWilliams, Clinical Fellow, DETECT, Newcastle Hospital.

One need only turn on the television to hear about problems with Ireland's health service. Accident and Emergency crises, long waiting lists, strikes and scandals cover the front pages of our newspapers. It is always refreshing, therefore, to hear of a good news story regarding mental health, particularly in the Wicklow area. The Dublin and East coast Treatment and Early Care Team (DETECT) is one such story. A national pilot project set up to identify psychosis at an early stage, DETECT operates out of the Wicklow, Cluain Mhuire and Elm Mount mental health services, and celebrates its first birthday on February 14th this year.

So, what is psychosis? Essentially, it is a cluster of signs and symptoms in which we lose touch with reality, affecting our senses, our thinking and sometimes our behaviour. People with psychosis may hear or see things that aren't there (auditory or visual hallucinations); have fixed false beliefs (delusions); experience disjointed thinking (thought disorder); or feel emotionally blunt, lacking in motivation and socially isolated.

Common early signs include poor concentration, suspiciousness, deteriorating self care and worsening school or work performance. Understandably, these symptoms can profoundly affect quality of life, relationships, employment and education. In some cases, they can lead to substance misuse, depression and suicide.

Schizophrenia is the commonest illness in which psychosis is a prominent feature. Contrary to popular belief, schizophrenia is not a 'split personality' and people with the illness are no

more violent than anyone else. Other illnesses with psychotic symptoms include those associated with illicit drugs, mania and depression.

Psychosis is a common condition. It affects roughly 75,000 Irish people - three percent of our population and enough people to fill Croke Park. Of these, approximately half have schizophrenia. It usually develops between the ages of 15 and 35 and, each year, a further 1,000 or so people develop the illness, roughly 25 of whom live in the Wicklow area. All forms of psychosis place a considerable personal and economic burden on affected individuals, on their families and on the taxpayer.

Funded by the Health Service Executive and the Hospitaller Order of St John of God, DETECT aims to increase public awareness of psychosis, allowing those experiencing the illness, their families and their friends know that help is available. Moreover, DETECT is a free service, available through any general practitioner who can refer to the

Wicklow area mental health service. Once DETECT is informed that an assessment is required, contact is initiated within 72 hours.

Assessment for psychosis is normally carried out in the person's own home, in Newcastle Hospital, or in one of Wicklow's outpatient clinics, situated in Bray, Greystones, Wicklow town and Arklow. The assessment usually requires two or three meetings, each around 90 minutes in duration, where the doctor or nurse enquires about everyday life to establish what type of problems, if any, the person is having. Families are also consulted regarding how the person has been both physically and mentally over the preceding months or years. Treatment is mostly delivered by the Wicklow area mental health services, however DETECT offers cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) for psychosis, a carer information and education course and a recovery programme.

Overall, the importance of public awareness and accessing help early can-

not be over-emphasised. DETECT represents a major collaborative step forward in our approach to mental health services. Indeed, albeit a pilot project with limited funding, it is hoped that DETECT will spread nationally as soon as possible to improve the outcome for the 1,000 or so mostly young people who develop psychosis annually in Ireland.

## Common Early Signs of Psychosis

These early signs are simply a guide and should be viewed in the context of normal age-appropriate behaviour. Indeed, the vast majority of people with these symptoms do not have psychosis. For careful and sensitive use only, therefore, the list includes: Social withdrawal; Impaired concentration; Suspiciousness; Deteriorating self-care; Worsening school or work performance; Reduced motivation; Confused, strange or bizarre thinking

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