

acknowledgements



ince this is the first conference to be organised around the topic of family support, as we in the Network perceive it, it is a learning experience for all involved. The organisers are aware that maybe, in retrospect, they will discover that many of the procedures might have been done better and differently. However, the learning accomplished at this conference will give direction to future endeavours including future conferences.

On behalf of the Network, I would like to express our appreciation to everyone involved in making the conference the success it was. We would like to say a special thank you to the management and staff of CityWide Drugs Crisis Campaign for their support and assistance in the planning and organising of the conference.

While you can plan a conference to perfection, provide the best facilities, draw on the best speakers and facilitators it can still be a failure. The one element that made a success of this conference was the delegates. People travelled from all corners of this island and it is to them we would like to express our warmest thanks. It was stated at the beginning of the conference that there were three elements involved in making the conference a success - *work, networking and socialising*. I can report that all three were entered into with enormous passion.

We are conscious that no matter how detailed we are in thanking people we are bound to forget somebody. I would like to assure you it wasn't done deliberately and hope that you accept this as thanks to each and every one involved.

Phillip Keegan, October 2002.

INTRODUCTION

This is the first conference organised by citywide family support network specifically for family members of drug users and those who work within or are interested in the field of drug addiction.

Family Support Groups

Over the past twenty years, the drug crisis, which devastated and continues to devastate many communities in Ireland, has brought particular pain to the families of drug users. These families have not only had to cope with the devastation of what is happening to their loved ones through drug use, but have often experienced loneliness, isolation and despair in trying to deal with the problem. Some of the responses to drugs within communities (e.g., marches on homes and the public naming of people) have had the unintended effect of isolating and stigmatising the families of drug users.

In the late '80s and early '90s, in an effort to redress this isolation and stigmatisation, families of drug users in Dublin began to respond by forming Family Support Groups. In these groups family members have an opportunity to share experiences and provide one another with support.

In February 1999 Dublin CityWide Drugs Crisis Campaign invited representatives from 30 Family Support Groups from all areas of Dublin to plan an event for the Millennium. This event had three main aims

- To highlight the amount of drug related deaths.
- To draw attention to the invaluable work done by Family Support groups.
- To alleviate the stigma attached to drug use within a family.

The group decided on a multi-denominational Service of Commemoration and Hope, which took place in Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Sean Mc Dermot Street on 1st February 2000.

Citywide Family Support Network

Following the huge success of the Service it was decided that the Network would continue in order to build on the invaluable work it had begun. This Network consists of representatives of Family Support Groups, individual family members and those working directly with families affected by drug use.

Over the years it has become apparent for Family Support Groups and their members that being part of the Network gives:

- Family Support Groups strength by networking with similar groups and through sharing information with them.
- A sense of security to Family Support Groups in knowing that problems do not have to be solved in isolation—there is support available from the Network for families and drug users.

Background to the Conference

The Family Support Network has helped to highlight the devastating impact that drug misuse has on all members of a family. It has also highlighted the lack of services and supports for families in this situation. The Network is committed to working with all the key players to develop services in a way that meets the needs of families. In order to do this, it is necessary to examine what the needs of families are and what we mean by *Family Support*—a term that is used all the time within the Network.

Format of the Conference

The conference format was a mixture of addresses from 'professionals' (i.e., civil servants, academics, researchers and practitioners in the area of drug misuse) and workshops comprising members of family support networks, recovering drug users and practitioners (e.g., social workers, community workers, etc.). Over the course of the conference there were three workshops, two on the first day of the conference, in the morning and afternoon and one on the morning of the second day. Conference delegates were assigned to one of eight workshops groups of approximately 20 persons. Every workshop group had a facilitator appointed by the conference organisers.

Aims of the Conference

The aims of the conference were fourfold. They are to:

- Highlight the crucial role played and the invaluable work carried out by Family Support Groups in relation to drug misuse.
- Define what is meant by *family support*.
- Identify the needs of Family Support Groups.
- Begin to develop a partnership between Statutory Agencies and Family Support Groups to address the needs of drug users and their families.

Expected Outcomes

The four main outcomes expected from this conference were to achieve:

- A greater awareness of the impact of the drug problem on families.
- A greater awareness of the work of family support groups and the value of that work.
- An increased knowledge and understanding of the different models of family support work and how they can be delivered.
- A dialogue between Statutory Agencies and Family Support Groups around the needs of drug users and their families.

Summary

This first conference organised by Citywide Family Support Network has aims and expected outcomes that will further their work of supporting the families of drug users. This will be done by:

- Highlighting the importance of the organisation's work to families of drug users,
- Bringing the issues relevant to family support to a wider audience and
- Bridging the gap between the families' first-hand knowledge of the issues surrounding drug abuse and the inadequate social policies, which they perceive do not address many pertinent issues relative to the problems they and users experience.

Key issues from the workshops

The workshops were at the heart of the conference, providing people with an opportunity to contribute and participate in the discussion, based on their own experiences. The following sections outline the workshop content in detail and it reflects both the experiences that people have lived through and the benefits that people get in coming together to look at that experience.

From the workshop discussions there are a number of key issues emerging for the Family Support Network.

Family Support Groups have a really important role to play and there is a need to get more information about them and a clearer picture of what they do out to the wider community and to the statutory agencies.

Families have hard earned experience and knowledge around the drugs issue and its effects. For this reason, they need to be seen as partners in the developments of services and policies, along with other community people, drug users and statutory agencies. At the moment, families are not seen as partners in the policy making process.

Families can make a key contribution to the treatment of their family members. However, they are not currently being supported or facilitated in doing this and this needs to change.

It is very clear from the discussion that one of the key supports for families is the availability of proper treatment and support services for the family member who is using drugs. One of the biggest difficulties for families is the lack of services for drug users.

While the development of adequate services for drug users is key, families also have their own needs and the issue of developing services for families has not been addressed at all. An example is the National Drugs Strategy, which does not include families.

The specific issue of financial support for family members who are caring for the children of drug users needs to be highlighted and addressed immediately.

There was a lot of discussion around the need for family experience to be recognised in relation to accessing jobs in family support and other related areas. Training opportunities that have been developed in the community need to be more available for people to enable them to access paid employment.

People from communities outside of Dublin highlighted the difficulty of the drug issue being openly acknowledged and discussed in these areas. Acknowledging the problem is a key first step in doing something about it. Accessing services is a huge problem for people from outside Dublin.

The effects on families and drug users of the Housing Act and evictions came up in the discussions and it needs to be recognised that current policy is affecting people in a really negative way.

There were a wide variety of experiences in relation to working with statutory agencies, both positive and negative. In the discussion, the negative experiences have outweighed the positive for families to date, but there are examples of the benefits when families and statutory agencies can work together.

The new Family Support Agency will be a key statutory player in the future and the Network will need to develop links with this new agency.

Finally, the discussions identified the Family Support Network as a key support both for groups and individuals in bringing people together, in accessing, sharing and circulating information and in building on people's experience. The role of lobbying and campaigning is also identified as a key role for the network into the future and in order to do this, the Network needs to raise its profile and become better known.

the conference

The conference centred around three Family Support themes:

- The background to Family Support • The current situation • The way forward •

DAY ONE, SESSION ONE: FAMILY SUPPORT—THE BACKGROUND

This session was designed to provide delegates with the history of the development of Family Support from an academic perspective and from the experiences of those who were the founding members of the Family Support Network. The speakers for this session were Stephanie Holt Dept. of Social Studies T.C.D. and Anna Quigley, CityWide Drugs Crisis Campaign.

DAY ONE, SESSION TWO: FAMILY SUPPORT—THE CURRENT SITUATION

This session was designed to provide delegates with information on current issues in social policy about service provision on drug related issues from the perspective of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs and the Health Boards. Information on the experience of these policies and practices from the point of view of Family Support Groups and information on the work of the National Advisory Committee on Drugs completed the session. The speakers were Catherine Hazlett, DSCFA; Dave Little, NAHB; Cathal Holland, Family Support Network and Mairead Lyons, NACD.

DAY ONE, SESSION THREE: FAMILY SUPPORT—THE WAY FORWARD

This session was designed to examine the ways Family Support could be strengthened to meet the needs of the families of drug users in a relevant way and to liase on their behalf with communities, voluntary and statutory agencies and the State in a spirit of partnership. The speakers for the final session were Fiona Nolan, Community Artist and Group Therapist and Sadie Grace, Family Support Network

Discussion and Conclusions

Over 170 delegates attended the conference from all over the Island of Ireland. Many of these delegates were members of Family Support Groups, Family Support Networks, drug users and others were delegates who are members of statutory agencies (e.g., Social Workers, Community Workers, Health Board Community Development Workers, Outreach Workers, Addiction Counsellors, Family Therapists G.Ps, Nurses, etc.).

The format of the conference was a blend of formal lectures and workshops. The formal lectures were given by professionals on different academic and social policy aspects of the drugs issue. Members of the Family Support Network talked about the experiences of communities, families and users relative to the drugs issue. Three themes were addressed in the three formal sessions:

- The Background to Family Support,
- The Current Situation and
- The Way Forward.

Additionally three workshops (divided into eight groups, with approximately 20 participants in each) were held over the course of the two days in which participants (parents, recovering drug users and professionals) got the opportunity to discuss a series of pre-formulated questions.

It became obvious to this author over the course of the conference that an interesting and common phenomenon was occurring. Individuals representing the professionals tended to talk about drugs issues from the point of view of the “ideal”, that is “... an idea that is regarded as perfect or as a standard for attainment or imitation” (Oxford English Dictionary). In this instance the “ideal” was social policy issues, research findings, the structures of statutory organisations, etc. Whereas those participants on the podium or in the workshop groups who are family members of drug users or work in communities with drug users and their families had a different tale to tell. Their experiences could be classified as the “real”, in this instance, the reality of the drugs issue. In many instances, between the ideal and the real there can be a “reality gap” that is a gap between the ideal (social policy and its attendant structures) and the real (as experienced by the people who are the target of social policy and those who work with them). This is accompanied by a gap between the perceptions of the members of the two different groups about the reality of the situation—and this conference was a classic example of a reality gap.

Having identified a reality gap, what can organisations and individuals do to eliminate or reduce it? The first breakthrough is being aware of the existence of the gap. The next step is what many workshop participants suggested doing—lobbying:

- Civil servants to formulate more relevant social policies in consultation with drug users and their families,
- Academics to engage in meaningful and relevant research in consultation with drug users and their families,
- Statutory organisations to interact with voluntary organisations to make the services they provide more relevant to the recipients of the service (i.e., drug users and their families).

During the conference the devastating impact that drug use in the family has on all family members was highlighted, as was the lack of services and supports for families in this situation. This information was especially evident in the information emanating from the workshops.

Although a formal evaluation of the conference was carried out, it is not within the remit of this document to report on it. However, it was evident to this author that the conference achieved many of its aims.

The first aim was:

- To highlight the crucial role played and invaluable work carried out by Family Support Groups in relation to drug use.

The crucial role played and the invaluable work carried out by Family Support Groups was evident from the presentations given by the various members of the Family Support Network and from information emerging from the workshops, which were reported on above. However, whether this work was evident to the representatives of statutory agencies is not clear. It seemed that there was a chasm between what was being presented in the formal papers of academics and civil servants in the main body of the conference and the information about the needs of families and drug users in the presentations of the representatives of the Family Support Network. Additionally, the discussions in the eight workshop groups over the three workshop sessions differed markedly from the perceptions of the representatives of the statutory agencies.

Some representatives from statutory agencies (e.g., community and social workers) were present at the conference and at the workshops but representatives from higher up in the chain of command in these organisations were not. It can only be hoped that the information about the needs of Family Support Groups, families and drug users generated in the workshops will filter upwards to bring about the changes in drug policy the members of the workshop groups highlighted as being necessary.

- To define what we mean by family support.

Although no formal definition of ‘family support’ was formulated at the conference, it was evident that many different kinds of family supports should be available to families in distress because of drug abuse. These supports included help from:

- The extended family network,
- Family support groups,
- Local communities,
- Voluntary organisations,
- Statutory agencies and
- The State.

Drug users and their families should not be cast in the passive role of being just receivers of services. Therefore, families and communities should play an active part in the development and delivery of services.

Additionally, Family Support Groups are invaluable for assisting families: when they initially discover they have a member who is a drug user; providing families with information about drug use at an informal and formal level and supporting them through difficult times.

It could therefore be said that family support is a multi-layered, multi-dimensional phenomenon.

- To identify the needs of family support groups.

The participants in the eight workshop groups over the three workshop sessions identified the many needs of family support groups at both the macro (societal and community) level and the micro (family and individual) level. At the macro level there is a need for:

- An Ireland-wide network, including networking with family support groups in Northern Ireland.
- The recognition of the importance of the role of families to be recorded in the National Drugs Strategy.
- A respite centre for families and recovering drug users.
- A help-line for families in crisis.
- An examination of the efficacy of the current practice in the use of methadone maintenance.
- An examination of the usefulness of alternative treatment methods including acupuncture.

Information on the rights and entitlements of grandparents and other carers inside and outside the extended family who look after the children of those who use drugs or have died because of drug use.

At the micro level there was the need for:

- Professionals to listen to and respect the views of the experts—the families of drug users and the drug users themselves.

The final conference aim was:

- To begin to develop a partnership between statutory agencies and family support groups in addressing the needs of drug users and their families.

This partnership between family support groups and statutory agencies has begun by having the conference. Informal dialogue and information exchange did take place between delegates who are members of statutory agencies and delegates who are members of Family Support Groups. In order to keep up the momentum, it will be necessary to develop this informal dialogue into more formal structures so that real changes can occur which will address the needs of drug users and their families.

It is evident that the work of the conference has promoted the issues relevant to drug abuse and the need for a multi-dimensional approach to family supports to a new plane. The onus now is on the Family Support Network to:

- Be the voice of an all-Ireland network,
- Nurture the emerging dialogue between themselves and the representatives of statutory agencies.

Additionally, it is incumbent on statutory agencies to:

- Heed the valuable information about the needs of drug users and their families emanating from this conference, and
- Act to redress all identified gaps in service and provision immediately in a planned way and in consultation with drug users and their families.

Key recommendations

Throughout the conference, the theme emerged strongly of the need for families to become partners in service development, service delivery and the policy making process. The Network should meet with the new Family Support Agency to look at how they can work together in developing a partnership role for families.

The employment of Family Support Workers through the Health Boards is an important development. The Network should develop links with the relevant Health Boards to look at how family services and drug services can be delivered in a more co-ordinated way.

A piece of research needs to be carried out to describe and present the work of family support groups to a wider audience, both within the communities and the statutory agencies. The Network should continue to develop its links with the NACD (National Advisory Committee on Drugs).

There should be an immediate campaign jointly organised by the Network and the Health Boards to highlight the financial supports that can be made available to people who are caring for the children of drug users.

There is a need for an immediate review of the 1997 Housing Act and housing policies in relation to drug users. Families need to be involved in this review.

Family groups in areas outside of Dublin need to be informed about and included in the setting up of the Regional Drug Task Forces. This will allow family support work to be recognised and supported in these communities.

The Network should meet with the Minister with responsibility for the drugs strategy to discuss how families can be included in the National Drugs Strategy.

The Family Support Network has a key role to play in the development of Family Support work on the drugs issue, by bringing together all of the key players and supporting more family groups to become involved. Adequate resources need to be made available for the development of the network and these resources should come both through the National Drugs Strategy and the new Family Support Agency.

CITYWIDE FAMILY SUPPORT NETWORK