

Ending the Silence & Stigma:

Part 4 – Starving On Our Streets

Most people think of malnutrition as a sad problem common to developing countries or to parts of the world left in crisis from war, famine, or drought. But with 10,275 people in Ireland now left homeless – and the most vulnerable men and women of all not even included in those numbers – a slow kind of starvation is unfolding right here on our streets. In this final CEO's report for 2019, learn about the symptoms and prevalence of this little-known tragedy, and discover how you are helping...*



Dr. Sharon Kennelly is a Clinical Specialist Dietitian working in the HSE Primary Care Service

Improvement Programme. With a PhD in the identification and treatment of malnutrition in the community setting, Dr. Kennelly is uniquely qualified to speak about malnutrition in Ireland – and quick to point out that it's far more common than most people think.

Rough sleepers most at risk

Dr. Kennelly noted that international studies show as many as a third of all people who are homeless are malnourished. Compare this to a rate of just two percent in the general population in Ireland, and you begin to sense the scope of the suffering. It's worse yet for women and men using emergency shelters or sleeping rough who, she wrote, "are found to be most at risk" of all – important evidence for

getting help to where it's needed most, like your coalface support for MQI and the Night Café (see related story in the Autumn 2019 *Quay Times* newsletter). Masking the scale of this suffering even further is the fact that the women and men who come to the Night Café, because they have fallen so far off society's radar, never even make it onto the official counts of people who are homeless in Ireland. Considering the toll malnutrition takes, this

omission – which also leaves out rough sleepers and people in domestic violence shelters – is a true human tragedy.

How malnutrition hurts the body

It's hard to imagine anything that could make homelessness harder. Malnutrition does. Weight loss is sometimes an effect, but it is only the beginning of a long and heartbreaking list of symptoms.



Starving On Our Streets_{,continued}

Wounds are slower to heal. Recovery from illness takes longer. Muscle strength and concentration are reduced. And you feel tired and cold all the time – all the more punishing when you're alone on the streets as dark, damp days descend. In an equally cruel twist, at the moment sustenance is needed, malnutrition robs you of your appetite. Depression, too, can take hold.

Add to the litany of physical symptoms a lack of money to buy even a small bit of food, and nowhere to store or prepare the items that nourish most – or even to know when you'll eat again – and day-to-day hunger can quickly cascade into something more serious. All this, when you are literally not even among the people in Ireland who are counted.

Why frontline responders matter

It is precisely because of all the above factors that frontline responders like staff at MQI and other homeless services are often first to notice someone suffering from malnutrition. Dr. Kennelly

MQI frontline responders like Riverbank's Chef Dave (right) are taking every possible step recommended by Dr. Kennelly: meals offered at dependable intervals, snacks provided as often as the budget allows, full-fat dairy products including milk and cheese included in the weekly menu, and careful consideration always given to offering a good protein source. These guidelines are echoed at MQI's High Park and St. Francis Farm residential recovery services, where people coming out of drug addiction can also suffer from malnutrition. Said Chef Dave, "Thanks to our donors, clients get a hot meal every night at the Night Café the likes of chili and rice, stews, coddles, shepherd's pie. It wouldn't be fancy stuff, but being cold on the streets they need homely cooking inside them."



wrote that a dietitian is the best resource at this point, but rightly recognised that among such a vulnerable group of people, even getting to appointments can be impossible.

Without good people to support work like MQI's and other frontline services, it's unsettling to think that no one would be there to see the people who are starving on our streets. But on the pages of special

reports like this one, there is, at least, a voice speaking out against the silence and stigma. And that is the only way change can begin.

To read more about malnutrition among people who are homeless, see Dr. Sharon Kennelly's excellent article for MQI's blog on www.mqi.ie/sharon-kennelly. Many thanks to her for sharing her expertise to help fragile lives here at home. ■

145,000

According to the HSE, an estimated 145,000 people in Ireland are either malnourished or at risk of malnutrition at any given time. Sadly this figure does not include women and men who are sleeping rough on our streets and among the most vulnerable of all to malnutrition.

Source: Malnutrition in Ireland, Health Service Executive, <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/2/primarycare/community-funded-schemes/nutrition-supports/malnutrition-in-ireland/>.



"Ending the Silence and Stigma" has been a special four-part series in 2019 for MQI's supporter newsletter, *Quay Times*. For earlier issues or extra copies, ring Emma on **01 524 0965** or email to supportercare@mqi.ie.