



## THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

We have heard the stories of the teachers, nurses and other public servants who have struggled for many years with the inequity of a public pay system that results in those who entered the public pay system after 2010 being paid thousands less than those who entered before then. I do not think there is anyone who would argue that teaching professionals providing a similar service should be paid less depending on when they qualified, it is as they might say a “no brainer”.

I spoke in my inaugural address about the importance of speaking up when things needed to be said, without fear or favour because it is the right thing to do. In clinics, services and schools all around the country today we have highly educated and talented psychologists providing much needed psychological services to those who are vulnerable and in need. In my service I have been lucky enough to share an office with and work alongside predominantly psychologists in clinical and counselling training. I have yet to have an educational psychologist in training with me, but I hope I may do one day soon.

As part of our current strategic plan, we have as one of our core philosophies in PSI the principle of integrity. I wonder how there is any integrity in a system that has not a 10% differential between public servants providing a critical service, but a 100% plus differential. Can you imagine the very justified public and union outrage that would occur if there was a 100% plus pay differential between teachers or nurses who were providing a service, and members of the same profession providing a service who were paid nothing?

This is the elephant in the room. It is the issue we must speak about, that we must shout about from the roof tops. I say these words having come through training from a position of relative privilege. I was lucky enough to be selected for training on the PSI Diploma in Clinical Psychology and even luckier to be paid during this training. This was over 17 years ago. How many of my psychology colleagues in education or counselling psychology over those 17 years had to find whatever way they could to find the money necessary to self-fund their training? How many were left burdened by debt as a result of having to self-fund? But what does self-fund mean? It means taking on part-time jobs in retail or pubs, adding hours on top of your placement and training, research and literature reviews, and projects and assignments. Hours that you must work to pay bills for three years. Hours that you must work where you cannot be with your friends or kids. It means adding the cost of training to your mortgage, putting yourself into debt for three years, seeking the support of parents to fund your training. This is the elephant in the room of which we must speak.

You may be wondering, why focus on this now? The conversation must start at some point. I am struck by how the implications of COVID-19 have for me, placed a real spotlight on the specific circumstances of these colleagues in psychology. As they do not get paid, they are not employees of the state and are not eligible for redeployment within the public service. Their skills and enthusiasm are not being availed of in many cases, and at a time when we need it most. COVID-19 has also meant that for many of these trainees their ability to go to their extra part-time work has been curtailed, or in many cases it's gone, and

they have no opportunity to earn at all. Then there is the additional stressor of securing and completing the hours and days needed on placement to qualify and make them eligible for future employment. PSI has issued guidance designed to allay trainees' fears and convey our intent to show flexibility during this unprecedented time. Trainees and courses should expect no less from their representative body and we will not be found wanting when it comes to this. We will also not be found wanting when it comes to advocating for similar flexibility for future employment eligibility criteria and equitable career opportunities for trainees impacted by COVID-19.

With any issue like this, the devil is in the detail, the detail is where it gets real and you can have a better understanding of what has been contributed and at what cost. In the time since the education and counselling courses moved to doctoral level, there have been approximately 106 psychologists in educational training and 144 psychologists in counselling training on the courses. There are some other important numbers to consider when analysing this issue. All figures are approximate. Collectively these psychologists in training will have paid €2.8 million in fees during that period. That was not a typo, €2.8 million! Educational psychologists in training have contributed 24,000 days while on their courses and counselling psychologists in training have contributed 65,000 direct contact hours with clients during training. This is work with children, adults, families and communities that is delivered with skill and commitment to improve the lives of others, and it was delivered for free.

I have yet to hear of any justifiable reason why counselling or educational colleagues should not be paid during training. In fact, I have never heard any reason, justifiable or not, why they should not be paid. Even if I did, I believe it would be a hollow attempt at a justification and I would happily debate anyone who would argue against this funding being put in place without delay.

PSI has taken admirable and much-needed stances on issues of national and societal importance in recent years. In the 50th year of the foundation of our Society it is time we also took a robust stance on the inequity that has existed for far too long within our own profession. In recent meetings with the HSE where we advocated for this inequality to be addressed, there was broad agreement that something needs to be done. This is welcomed but we need to move beyond agreement and move swiftly towards action. Unity of purpose from the entire psychology community in supporting this will increase the chances of this becoming a long overdue reality.

In other news, I hope that our members are doing the best that they can in these strange times. It has been a tough few months for everyone, not just as psychologists but as dads, mums, brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, as people. COVID-19 has radically transformed all our realities. We are grappling with the necessity to move into the online realm without much warning or preparation. But one thing that I feel is a strength of our profession is the ability to adapt to even the most adverse of circumstances. And adapt we have. Psychologists have answered the national call, from swabbing, to contact tracing, to staffing helplines for frontline nurses and medics providing psychological first aid or producing psychoeducational videos and resources. Thank you to you all, you are a credit to our profession. And at the same time there is a necessity to conserve our resources and

prioritise self-care. We do not know for certain what lies ahead, but there is a strong likelihood that the need for psychological support at a variety of levels will be required long after the contagion curve has been flattened. Waiting lists will invariably grow longer. Psychologists on the ground may feel a pressure to do more, to stretch themselves further. You can only do so much with the resources that we currently have and what you will do will be good enough.

Many members, divisions and special interest groups have stepped forward in recent weeks and months to offer to work on guidance documents that would be of benefit to members and the public and I thank you all for that commitment. It also got me thinking about something that I do not think was ever clear to me and perhaps not to you also. We all know that we are a members' organisation and from our recent member engagement survey, we know that many more of you would like to be more actively involved in PSI. We need to be better at harnessing and empowering the incredible range of knowledge of our members into guidance documents and position papers.

As a member focussed and led organisation, you all have the power to work on and submit position statements for Council to consider and feedback on. We will never realistically have the time or expertise among Council to prepare guidance on full range of topics that are needed, so we need to empower members more to collectively contribute. I would welcome feedback from members about how we might best initiate and coordinate this, perhaps through our website where members could see a range of topics that they could contribute to? I am open to all suggestions.

By the time you will have read this our 50th anniversary will have occurred. The 16 May 1970 marked the founding of our professional body. We had hoped to have a gala screening of the documentary we commissioned, but we have had to postpone that for now. We will still be reflecting on social media about the incredible legacy that PSI has had thus far and celebrating the potential that we are yet to realise. Friends and colleagues have commented on how it must be hard to be PSI President for the 50<sup>th</sup> year and coinciding with a global pandemic. There are seeds of truth in most things so in truth yes there is some lingering sadness at missed opportunities to meet with members and celebrate in person. But that sadness has been overshadowed by pride, pride at how resilient we are as a profession. In the words of Lou Holtz, *"Show me someone who has done something worthwhile, and I'll show you someone who has overcome adversity."* We are not only overcoming adversity on a personal level but are also supporting and empowering others to overcome it too. To me, there is no better time to celebrate where we have come from, what we are and what we do.

Mark Smyth  
PSI President  
President@psychologicalsociety.ie

**Happy  
Birthday  
PSI!**

**Saturday 16 May 2020  
marked the 50th anniversary  
of the first meeting of the  
Psychological Society of  
Ireland. While the current  
COVID-19 restrictions caused  
plans to be changed, the day  
was marked with memories  
and tributes shared on social  
media. Check them out and  
share your own memories  
and stories using the  
hashtag #MyPSI.**