

Our young men are dying at a rate that's one of the world's highest and no one can say why

Time for a debate on suicide

BY PHIL MAC GIOLLA BHÁIN

When you're in a hole and you ask for a hand out and you are lifted out of the hole why jump back in again and start digging?

That is what Dr James McDaid TD did in the *Sunday Independent* on May 7. I had referred to his suicide gaffe of 2002 in *Daily Ireland* two weeks ago when I was assessing his career.

I said it was a shame that the "selfish bastards" outburst would be his defining moment because there was much to commend his career in public service.

For some reason, however, he felt it necessary to push the self-destruct button again on this issue.

To gauge the reaction to his interview in the *Sunday Independent*, I spoke to Mary McLernan of Suicide Teach Orphan and Prevent (Stop), a group of relatives in Leitrim bereaved by suicide.

I then broadcasted on the Gerry Farry show on Ocean FM last week in the hope that I would, finally, get a chance to debate this issue with the good doctor.

I was riding shotgun for Pat Buckley of the Suicide Bereavement Foundation. Pat is from Middleton, Co Cork, a place that knows far too much about the pain that is caused by suicide.

Dr McDaid would not go head-to-head with us. Instead he pre-recorded a self-serving piece that reiterated his views from the previous Sunday.

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The Ocean FM switchboards were jammed with people who were furious at McDaid. One lady actually turned up to the radio station's offices. Of course, McDaid wasn't there.

Pat Buckley spoke very eloquently of losing two brothers in the space of 16 months.

Mary McLernan lost her son Gary — aged 22 — to suicide. As a father of a healthy son, I cannot begin to understand the pain of someone like Mrs McLernan and neither can the good doctor.

Dr McDaid is, by his own admission, an idiot. Driving the wrong way up a dual carriageway while over the legal limit for alcohol probably doesn't have him in the best place to advise young men in avoiding self-destructive behaviour.

The pharmacological approach to the relief of distress causes more harm than good except, of course, for drug companies and the medicines who are wined and dined at conferences in exotic locations. Not all medicines, of course, are on that moral landscape.

Despite the pain he has caused with his remarks, Dr McDaid has my personal thanks for, inadvertently, bringing this issue into the public arena.

One thing is for sure that this society needs to take a long hard look at itself. We have fashioned a cold house for our young men.

The Republic experienced one of the fastest rising suicide rates in the world during the 1980s and 1990s — the overall

suicide rate having doubled over that period. The rise was largely confined to men and has been most striking in young men. The overall female suicide rate has not increased since 1980.

Based on official suicide mortality data from the Central Statistics Office, between 2000 and 2002, there were, on average, 494 deaths by suicide in Ireland annually, peaking at 519 in 2001.

Psychological studies have shown consistently that the young men who complete suicide are sensitive, caring and thoughtful. We should be finding out why.

When *Irish Times* columnist John Waters had initially flagged up this issue in the mid 1990s he was pilloried as a misogynist. His writing about a specifically male problem was deemed "an attack on women".

Now that young women are also suicide-prone, although nowhere in numbers approaching the male levels, then at least now there may be a debate.

When John was, briefly, consulting editor of *Magill* in 2001 he commissioned me to write a piece on the suicide of young men in rural Ireland.

I wrote a piece for *Magill* entitled *The Flight of the Earls*. The title came from a young man who had driven off Rathmullan pier in Donegal in his works delivery van.

Just before he did that he phoned his employer to apologise for the damage he was about to inflict upon the van.

It struck me that this body of water had seen the earls leave Ireland forever in Elizabethan times. Like the young man, the earls felt they had no place left in Ireland.

The piece was well received, but it offended the politically correct of Dublin 4.

In the piece I said, and I still hold this to be true, that the feminisation of society and the culture in the media of denigrating males was, in part, an explanation for the gender specific nature of men in suicide statistics in the 26 Counties.

The *Magill* article caused a stir and I was invited onto Today FM's *The Last Word*.

On that show I was interrogated by Fintan O'Toole to justify my position. I told him that if nothing were done young men would continue to die. They have.

I also noted that he, with a weekly column in *The Irish Times*, had never written on this subject.

Also on the show was Dr Terry Lynch, a Limerick-based GP and psychotherapist and author of *Beyond Prozac*.

He agreed that there was no medical explanation why the young men of this society continue to commit suicide in increasing numbers each year.

Dr Lynch continues to be one of the good guys advocating a community response to mental well-being.

To this day, I have not seen a single piece by Fintan O'Toole on suicide.

He did state that people like him would have to be more open minded on what was

happening. His silence on the issue is deafening and, in a way, much more problematic than the outburst by McDaid in 2002.

At least there is something to be taken with there, something deed, quite easily taken to task.

There is a need for a national debate on suicide.

Why the rise? Why young men?

I took the article *The Flight of the Earls* and dramatised it onto a two-act play.

It was performed last November in the Balor Theatre, Ballybofey, Co Donegal, to an invited audience.

The play was funded by Donegal County Arts and the script is now in further development.

The play was cheered to the rafters in the Balor Theatre, but it offended some of the middle-class politically correct brigade in the audience.

Councillor Pádraig Mac Lochlainn of Sinn Féin approached me as the curtain fell to say that the play was "a triumph".

It is planned for the play to tour in 2007, the 400th anniversary year of the Flight of the Earls.

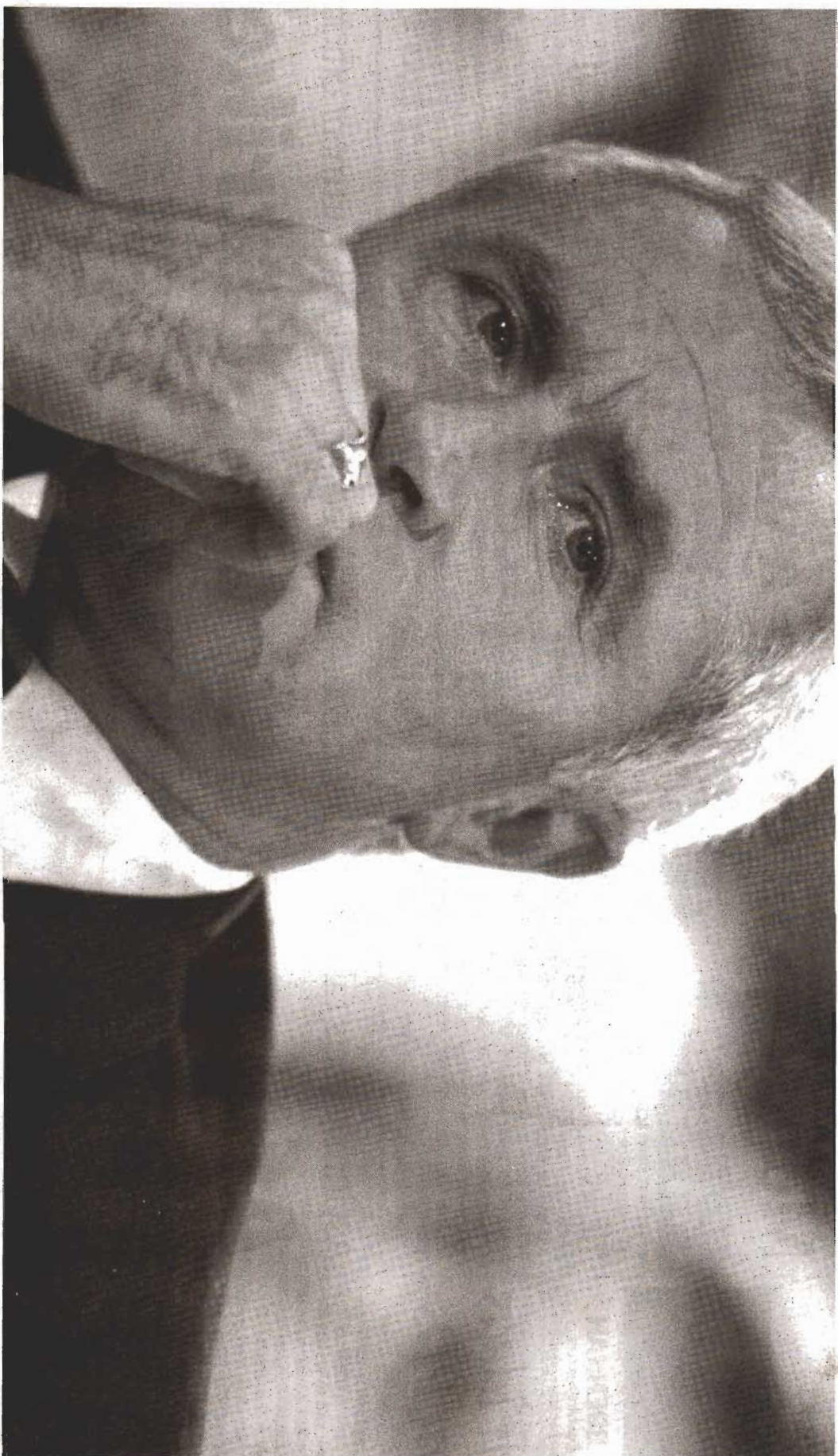
Hopefully it will focus minds on why some of our best young men, who are not "selfish bastards", find the pain of living in this society intolerable.

Now it is to women like Mary McLernan that we must look to if we are to stop losing our young men to suicide.

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OPINION

Wednesday May 17



Dr James McDaid has reignited the controversy over male suicide with his recent comments in the media