

2008 IPA EUROPEAN MEETING – Dublin Meeting Highlights

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After the success of the Irish team at last year's Cricket World Cup, I had a desire to visit Ireland – cricket is a wonderful game that brings people together. My opportunity came as the 2008 IPA European Meeting was held in Dublin between 8-11 April. This joint meeting between IPA and the Faculty of Old Age Psychiatry of the Royal College of Psychiatrists was extremely well-attended by both members of IPA and the Royal College. It was encouraging that many young professionals, from a wide range of disciplines, and a wide range of countries, participated in this joint initiative.

The main theme of the meeting was “Mental Health and Ageing - Towards a New Age of Enlightenment”. Large conferences often have a habit of diluting the contents when catering to a diverse group of professionals. However, this meeting met the challenge by ensuring that the content was appropriate for a diverse group of professionals, without affecting the quality. A number of young, first-time attendees, either at an IPA or the Faculty of Old Age Psychiatry conference, remarked on the usefulness of this conference.

What were the highlights? There were many and it is not possible to cover all in a short account. Also, there may have been many other highlights that I am unable to report because there were multiple, parallel sessions – it was impossible to attend all the parallel sessions even for an enthusiast!

The first plenary session kicked off with a fascinating presentation pertaining to elderly suicides and suicidal behaviour in China. Professor Helen Fung-kum Chiu, the President of IPA, set a very high standard for the rest of conference with her well-polished and highly scientific presentation. She described the findings of several unique studies from both rural and urban settings in China. A unique feature of these Chinese studies was a higher suicide rate in elderly women compared to men – the only country in the world, I believe, to have this gender pattern for elderly suicides. The subsequent presentations by Professor Jacobo Mintzer and Professor Alistair Burns on mortality in nursing homes and quality of life were highly informative and educational. The gauntlet to improve both mortality and quality of life among the elderly with psychiatric morbidity was thrown at us all!

Other plenary highlights included: an excellent eye-opening presentation on the management of falls in the elderly by Dr. Rose-Anne Kenny; an elegant presentation on the increasingly important area of protective and risk factors for dementia from Professor Peter Passmore was very well-received; Professor Frans Verhey shared an excellent, innovative, integrated approach to the care of dementia-sufferers; Professor Kenneth Shulman gave a very shrewd update on bipolar affective disorders in the elderly; and, Professor Brain Lawlor rounded the meeting during the last plenary session by sharing, with an eager audience, the association between the quality of

social engagement with depression, loneliness, and quality of life in the elderly – bringing together many of the themes presented, widely-discussed, and debated during the conference.

Mental health of older people and technology may not be obviously seen to go together. Well, this erroneous belief on my part was quickly corrected by an excellent set of papers pertaining to the use of technologies in improving mental health care of older people. Professor Jay Luxenberg should be congratulated on his continuing efforts to share such technological advances to improve mental health care of older people. Longitudinal studies of ageing and mental health from Australia and Ireland and a pan-European study designed to answer specific questions pertaining to the aetiology and natural history of cognitive impairment and related disorders were refreshing, especially for those of us who are reaching middle age.

The potential developments in the National Dementia Strategy in the United Kingdom seemed to have monopolized a session that also had an Australian perspective. The reason may have been the predominance of psychiatrists from the United Kingdom attending the meeting and great concern on part of these psychiatrists about possible major changes in service delivery. This session provided a platform to voice and express concerns to Professor Sube Banerjee, who is leading the development of the National Dementia Strategy in the United Kingdom.

An important highlight was a session on the penultimate day where young members of the Royal College were encouraged to present their research and be eligible for the prestigious Mohsin Naguib prize. This is an important initiative by the Faculty of Old Age Psychiatry of the Royal College of Psychiatrists to promote high quality research amongst trainee psychiatrists. I was privileged to have been asked, along with Professor James Lindesay, to be one of the adjudicators; this was a special privilege because the late Dr. Mohsin Naguib trained me in old age psychiatry. The quality of the papers in this session was excellent and indicated that the new generation of old age psychiatrists in the UK is there in force to carry the torch.

The finale of the conference was a fierce debate on the motion “This house believes old age psychiatrists should stick to dementia”. The proponent, Dr. Roger Bullock, and the opponent, Dr. Peter Connelly, both from the United Kingdom, made an excellent case for their respective positions. However, the hardened delegates (there were so many on the last morning) were persuaded by Dr. Peter Connelly. I recall attending a similar debate at the Royal Australia and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists annual meeting in Canberra in 1992, where the very need to have old age psychiatry was debated – and now it is a well-established speciality in Australia. Such debates are necessary to improve morale and sharpen collective thinking.

To me, the main markers for this successful meeting were: the presence of many young people from a range of countries and a range of disciplines; the quality and shrewdness of the questions asked by members of the audience in each session was some of the

best I have witnessed for a while; and, the conference must have been good because the last event – the debate - was hosted with the house almost full.

Such joint initiatives are always excellent because they provide both a local and an international flavor to the conference. Long may such an IPA tradition continue. As for cricket - well, after the meeting I was able to watch the first cricket match of the new season at Trinity College, albeit briefly, as rain stopped play!

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