

Ten deaths per year that could be avoided

IN the past four years, ten people are known to have died in Irish hospitals because they were given the wrong medication, or the wrong dose. That's ten fathers or mothers or sisters or brothers or children: ten families grieving who might otherwise have their loved one at home. Ten wholly unnecessary, preventable deaths.

Now of course we must acknowledge that every day, tens of thousands – perhaps hundreds of thousands – of medication doses are handed out. We know that many of our doctors and nurses are overworked, overtired and prone as a result to perfectly understandable human error. Some might even say that given the volumes of medicine dispensed, ten deaths over four years does not sound extreme.

Yet the deaths are just the tip of the iceberg. More than 70 drug errors are recorded every week: and a recent Hqa report found that 6% of hospital-discharge prescriptions contained potentially severe prescription errors.

No wonder the Irish Patients Association fears that the true figure for deaths and casualties as a result of drug errors could be significantly higher than the official figures suggest.

What the official figures do strongly indicate, however, is two central failings within our hospitals. The first is for a proper, robust system of checks which would make sure that medication errors are extremely hard to make. Human error can never be completely eliminated from any giant system: but, particularly with the aid of modern technology, it can always be reduced. A strong system of checks could be put in place to ensure that it was incredibly difficult for such a mistake to occur.

And therein lies the rub: unless someone is made to take responsibility for these errors, this will not happen. So long as those who are to blame are not held publicly accountable and responsible, nothing will change.

And by this we do not just mean pointing the finger at the nurse or doctor who makes an error: we mean holding the hospital managers and bosses responsible. If a medic disobeys the strict rules on prescriptions, then action should follow: but if a hospital does not have strict rules, and if the rules are not enforced, then it is the people in charge who should carry the can. After all, this is not just a serious issue: it is literally a matter of life or death.

Uncovering the truth

FERGUS Finlay, the respected head of one of our largest children's charities, alleges that nuns at mother and baby homes faked the death certificates of babies in order to meet the demand for adoption to the US and the UK.

His claims echo suggestions made in a HSE draft report, which suggests this could explain why death rates at homes appeared to fall dramatically once tighter laws around adoption were put in place in the 1950s.

Evidence for such a practice would be, by its nature, extremely difficult to find. Essentially, it relies on tracking down an adopted child – who is probably by now in his or her sixties or seventies – and proving that that person is actually the same child who was recorded by the nuns as having died.

Nevertheless, it is a claim which must now be fully investigated by the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes.

When it comes to addressing our past and reconciling ourselves to the reality of what happened in this country, the most important first step is ascertaining the truth – however hard others may have tried to bury it.

IT is a moment that every parent dreads – the moment when your child is stripped of his innocence. One of our sons was friends with a boy who, unbeknownst to us, had already left his childhood behind. The boy was invariably pleasant, polite and came from an extremely good home. And yet, somewhere along the line, that poor child had been exposed to pornography.

One day, our son revealed that this boy had shown his friends some graphic images on a phone. Naturally, as parents who have tirelessly sought to protect their children from this virus, we were alarmed and shocked. The fact that another child could, quite casually, undermine our son's innocence was nothing short of a nightmare. What we learned that day was that no matter how many safeguards you put in place at home, children have no such protections in public.

Instinctively, our son knew this was wrong and walked away. Thankfully, it neither fuelled his curiosity nor compromised his innocence. However, through no fault of his own, our precious child had seen something to which he should never have been exposed.

In that terrible instant, we realised that responsible parents must not only fight to protect their children at home. If we are to have any chance of keeping them safe, we must confront the threats which await them beyond the hall door. In our digital world, all it takes is one click and their innate innocence is gone for good.

It is now almost five months since Enda Kenny called for a national debate on pornography in Ireland.

Last October, the Taoiseach said that young people are being exposed to an 'avalanche of communications of all descriptions' on the internet. We should, he urged, 'have a national conversation about what is important for our children, what is a priority for our children when they are growing up and when they grow up'.

When I heard that speech, I cheered loudly in the hope that, at last, something might be done about a problem we seemingly refuse to face.

AS it happens, I also called for a national debate on this matter in this newspaper as far back as 2013 – the same

year that the then British prime minister David Cameron succeeded in having 'porn filters' put online by major internet providers.

Despite his robust defence that pornography was 'corroding childhood', and notwithstanding the widespread public support he received on the issue, the European Union ruled against Mr Cameron, declaring that all online traffic must pass 'without discrimination, restriction or interference'.

It was to Mr Cameron's great credit that he secured an opt-out to that ludicrous ruling. As he put it: 'I think it is absolutely vitally important that we enable parents to have that protection for their children from this material on the internet.'

Why, then, has it taken so long for the Irish Government to issue a significant statement

In recent weeks we have heard with horror about how the State failed to protect children in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. Yet today's children face a modern-day evil which is far more widespread: cyber-bullying, sexting and every vile kind of hardcore pornography imaginable, all thanks to unfettered internet access. If we do nothing, we are all guilty of...

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SATURDAY
ESSAY



by Dr Mark
Dooley

on an issue which affects every parent and child in the land?

Mr Kenny was correct: we desperately need to have a major public conversation on the implications of pornography on children.

As always in this country, however, his suggestion was greeted with stony silence. That is why he now has no option but to follow Mr Cameron's lead and legislate for practical measures which will help keep our children safe.

The truth is that while the schools are obsessing about the type of food our children

eat, we are in the midst of a porn epidemic to which every child is vulnerable. According to one of the world's biggest pornographic video-sharing websites, Ireland's porn use grew by 77% between 2010 and 2015. Also, in 2015, Pornhub.com revealed that, each month, Irish people pay 6.72million visits to that website alone – a figure that far exceeds the global average.

Alarming, Irish children are helping to boost those worrying statistics. Last year, the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children

received 420,000 calls from children – the majority from young boys confused by poor self-image and the pressures of premature sexualisation. According to the CEO of the ISPCC, Grainia Long, the issue that worries Childline volunteers most is the frightening increase in 'children viewing pornography' and those 'using highly sexualised language'.

In 2015, the ISPCC's annual report revealed that children as young as six were viewing pornography, while other youngsters were either engaging in sexual activity or sharing naked images of themselves online.

Caroline O'Sullivan, director of services for the children's charity, says the ISPCC is also aware 'from the calls that Childline receives, that young people are accessing porn sites at sleepovers where Wi-Fi is

Peril: We owe our children the duty of monitoring what they watch



AUGHTER OF INNOCENCE

available with no parental controls'. Most shockingly of all, it has also 'received contacts from children who discuss masturbation, rape and sexual fantasies in detail'.

Why, in the face of such horrific findings, do we continue to ignore a problem which is, in my estimation as a parent, the biggest threat to our children's safety, personal development and wellbeing?

Psychologically, morally and physically, no child is capable of dealing with the deep end of our 'pornified' culture.

Ms O'Sullivan sums it up accurately when she remarks: 'Children are being thrust into the adult ideals of physical attractiveness, being portrayed as "mini-adults" and being denied the innocence of childhood.'

This is not about freedom of speech or even about the rights of consenting adults. This is about one thing: the rights of our

children to their childhood. It is about preserving and protecting their beautiful innocence. It is about giving them a chance to grow without the pernicious pressures of a world devoid of all innocence, mystery and beauty.

WHERE, in other words, is the place of lasting love and affection in pornography? What role does self-respect or respect for women play in a domain devoid of decency? And when exposed to such degradation, what hope has a helpless little child to see in his peers anything more than objects for personal pleasure?

Wherever there is a screen, a phone or a tablet, our children are at risk. And yet, we continue to dig our heads more deeply in the sand,

as if, somehow, this problem can be sidestepped. The reality is that unless we deal with it now, vast numbers of Irish children will grow up as victims of something that will rob them of much more than their childhood.

The unconscionable silence following Enda Kenny's speech proves that we parents have no option but to take the matter firmly into our own hands.

Of course, we must exercise due diligence in the home, monitoring our children's online access, updating parental controls and keeping apace with the digital revolution. But, as my personal experience shows, while such vigilance is crucial, it is not sufficient to fully safeguard our children.

That is why we must put pressure on our schools to put in place online protection policies which will prevent children from accessing pornography in the playground.

They need to set up forums in which parents can be educated on the dangers and on how best to patrol their children's online time.

Critically, schools need to ensure that all parents are made aware of their responsibility to monitor what their children view online – especially when in the company of other children. That is because, as we discovered, it only takes one child with a phone, one unsupervised sleepover, to undo all the good work that parents do at home.

I know that many schools have these forums already in place, but who can deny that every school requires them as matter of extreme urgency?

It is true that there is an obesity epidemic among schoolchildren, and the question of 'faith schools' is high on the agenda.

However, it seems to me that there is no issue more pressing, or detrimental to our children's long-

term physical and psychological welfare, than that of online pornography.

To repeat: children need to grow as children. They need to experience the world, not as adults do, but with their innocence intact.

They need to savour and enjoy its beauty before their teenage years take their toll.

And if any parents think their children are immune to this problem, they should seriously think again.

The fact is that all parents have a common duty and interest to work together to combat a scourge which is indiscriminate when selecting its victims. In the absence of such parental cooperation, every child is a potential victim.

This means we must openly and frankly discuss the issue with our children once they come of age. They must know the dangers both for themselves and for others, and they must feel secure in being able to talk about the matter with those they trust. Otherwise, they will be left to the mercy of a world which is, as philosopher Roger Scruton once remarked, both 'shameless and loveless'.

OUR society is in the grip of something awful, the terrible effects of which we are only now beginning to fully comprehend. When such a small country is increasingly accessing so much pornography, we are surely in the midst of a national crisis. The grim fact that so many young lives have already been ruined should be enough to sharply focus the minds of those at the top.

Following last year's general election, the ISPCC called for a 'cyber safety strategy within the first 100 days of this Government'. That we are still waiting for the implementation of such a strategy is a disgrace. What is it in the ISPCC's shocking reports regarding the impact of pornography on young children that this Government doesn't get?

Noble as the Taoiseach's suggestion was, I now think the time for debates and conversations has well passed. Not only do we need a 'cyber safety strategy', we need the type of radical approach previously adopted by the Cameron government in Britain. We need a national forum to develop coherent and effective policies for protecting children against such a potent threat.

Groups like the ISPCC and Childline can only do so much. Their terrifying revelations should be enough to bring this to the very top of the national agenda.

However, until the Government responds with a robust policy, we parents are the only people standing between our children and this corrosive tide. And stand up for them we must, because they have only one childhood, one short period to be totally themselves.

I love my boys far too much to have their innocence wrenched away by forces beyond my control. That is why I shall fight tooth and nail to give them the childhood they deserve, a childhood which no child should ever be denied.

There is simply no alternative in a society where 'children's rights' are powerless to protect them from something so fundamentally wrong.