

THE NEEDLE & THE DAMAGE PREVENTED

ONE OF IRELAND'S MOST AUTHORITATIVE VOICES ON THE DRUGS DEBATE, TIM BINGHAM HAS WORKED IN THE AREAS OF STREET OUTREACH, NEEDLE EXCHANGE AND THE 'SAFER DANCING' INITIATIVE. INTERVIEW: OLAF TYARANSEN



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Tim Bingham has worked in the fields of addiction and mental health since 1995. He has operated in a variety of settings which have provided services to people affected by addiction and mental health – including detoxification units, street outreach, homeless hostels and intervention services for young people. He also set up one of the first safer dancing initiatives in the UK.

Bingham is the co-ordinator of the Irish Needle Exchange Forum and the sub-regional representative for the European Harm Reduction Network.

OLAF TYARANSEN: Tell me about the Irish Needle Exchange Forum.

TIM BINGHAM: The Irish Needle Exchange Forum began in 2008 and is basically a national harm reduction forum that promotes not just harm reduction in terms of needle exchange, but also safer drug use across all types of drugs. We're looking at party drugs at the moment – we don't know what's in a pill these days.

How important are needle exchanges?

Needle exchanges are a must. We look at Greece and other parts of Europe with few needle exchanges, and we see an increase in HIV and hepatitis C in those regions. So it obviously reduces the transmission of those viruses – but it also gets people into health services that wouldn't normally have access to those services. Giving out new equipment to people on a daily basis is one thing. But I'd like to see the authorities providing a 'consumption room' or safe injecting facilities. You see a lot of discussion in the media about people injecting on the street. There's more street injecting going on now than there has been for years.

Why is that?

I would argue that there is more heroin around now than there used to be. A clean, professional space to inject isn't just about getting people off the street, it's about detox. It's about treatment. There is just so much research out there now that proves that these types of facilities work.

Have the Irish authorities been helpful in setting up the Irish needle exchange?

In fairness, they have. I'd say in Europe, at the moment, we are one of the most progressive countries in terms of needle exchanges. If you look even at the UK, they're actually closing needle exchanges. So I'd say at the moment we're lucky. The National Drugs Strategy in Ireland, laid out by the HSE, talks about harm reduction and needle exchange services. Also something people forget is that it's not just heroin users but steroid users who can avail of these needle exchanges. They're another group of people that we really need to target and work with. There's a whole section of people out there who are using steroids, both orally and intravenously. We need to look into developing specific services for them.

You were involved in the UK's 'Safer Dancing' initiative...

We knew everything around MDMA at the time so we worked in a club and if anyone was getting hot or dehydrating, we took them to a dark room where they could get some assistance



Tim Bingham

from trained professionals and medics. But my work now is primarily looking at drug trends and online markets: that's the main concern of my independent research.

Was it a mistake closing the headshops?

That's a really good question. There were some people who were critical of the gardai over this. But there were also a lot of young people who were coming into contact with the gardai that would not usually have come into contact with them – coming from fairly middle class to upper class families. So they wouldn't be the 'usual' type.

Related to their consumption of headshop drugs?

A lot of this was related to mephedrone and other legal highs. They were doing things they wouldn't normally have done and doing things to get money to finance a habit, like robbing mobile phones. There's not a lot of statistics to support that, but we also know that some of the headshops were offering credit to these young people. So when they closed the headshops there was a group of young people who stopped using due to the drop-off in availability. However, those substances are still available on the street. What we've seen from other countries and other areas is that a lot of these substances are now being used to cut Class-A drugs: cocaine cut with mephedrone, for example. So the real problem now, since the closure of the headshops, is we

don't know what's in these drugs when they are being

sold on the street. So while it has cut off the supply to a group of young people who were vulnerable, who were coming in contact with the law and who were accessing mental health facilities and psychiatric services as a result of exposure to these drugs, there's this whole plethora of stuff that's being used on the street and there's definitely still mephedrone being sold in parts of Ireland – so that really hasn't stopped.

What about cannabis?

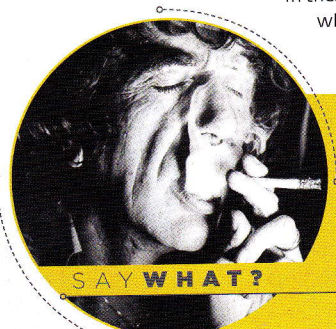
The problem is now with the headshop cannabis substitutes. What we have now is street cannabis being mixed with synthetic cannabis. So, it's been a move over to the cannabinoid products. So these "legal highs" or whatever you want to call them haven't stopped coming onto the streets. They are still easy to purchase.

So are things better or worse?

It depends on who you speak to. When you were buying something in a headshop, you were buying a product in a sealed pack with at least some kind of relative certainty as to what it contained. Now that you are buying what purports to be the same product, they are not in the same sealed packs. So since they have been broken up and distributed, they are more liable to be tampered with or cut with something. You can still buy them on the internet so that hasn't stopped.

Is there a big market for online drugs?

There is a big wholesale market on the internet for drugs. It's easy to buy stuff on the internet now be it through the open web or other channels. I think we're going to see a lot more of it in the future.



SAY WHAT?

"The Drug Enforcement Agency sent me to the worst jail in the country. I saw a guy being garrotted with a guitar string, another had his hear cut out with a homemade knife."

Howard Marks on doing time in the US