2012 Wayne Fenton Award for Exceptional Clinical Care

The Wayne Fenton Award for Exceptional Clinical Care was established in 2007 to recognize clinical providers who exemplify Dr. Fenton’s commitment to improving the daily lives of individuals with schizophrenia.

Dr. Eadbhard O’Callaghan

Formerly: Newman Professor of Mental Health Research, University College Dublin and Consultant Psychiatrist, DETECT Early Intervention Service and Cluain Mhuire Family Centre, St John of God Hospital, Dublin

The schizophrenia research community was greatly saddened to learn of the untimely death of Eadbhard O’Callaghan who passed away on May 2, 2011, at the age of 53. Eadbhard was one of the foremost researchers in Irish psychiatry and a passionate advocate of early intervention in psychosis. Almost an entire cohort of Irish academic psychiatrists passed through his hands as Tutor on the St John of God Psychiatric Training Scheme and are indebted to Eadbhard for first recognizing and encouraging their interest in research. He contributed many important articles on early risk factors for schizophrenia and was one of the earliest proponents of the neurodevelopmental model of schizophrenia.

Eadbhard was born in Dublin on July 8, 1957, and began his medical studies in the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland in 1976. On qualifying he specialized in psychiatry and joined the St John of God Rotational Training Scheme. On completing his membership examination he took up a post as Research Fellow in the St John of God services under the supervision of Conall Larkin and John Waddington. Eadbhard had a particular interest in psychotic disorders and in the “new” neurodevelopmental theories of schizophrenia, which were just coming to the fore at the time. Even though still a relatively junior researcher, he published highly cited articles on obstetric complications and minor physiological anomalies as risk factors for schizophrenia, thus providing crucial support for the neurodevelopmental model. One of us (R.M.M.) offered Eadbhard a fellowship at the Institute of Psychiatry and he spent 1 year there. This was the beginning of an extremely productive relationship despite a somewhat shaky start. The twin study that Eadbhard had originally come to work on did not go ahead and Eadbhard had to find something else to do. Robin remembers sitting in a bar in Davos during a schizophrenia conference with Eadbhard who was trying to convince him that the future of schizophrenia research was in epidemiology. Robin kept telling him that epidemiology was “old fashioned” and that he should get into something modern like neuroimaging. However, Eadbhard could be quietly stubborn and eventually won the point. With his colleagues, Nori Takei and Pak Sham, Eadbhard went on to publish a seminal article in the Lancet showing that prenatal influenza increases the risk for schizophrenia. This article changed the direction of Robin Murray’s research and his department soon became one of the main centers for epidemiological work in psychosis internationally. All due to the foresight and persistence of one (exceptional) young researcher.
Despite many entreaties to stay in the Institute of Psychiatry, Eadbhard returned to Dublin in 1991 to take up a post as Consultant Psychiatrist and Tutor in the St John of God Rotational Training Scheme—his old Alma Mater. He arrived back full of ideas and energy and inspired many psychiatric trainees to consider carrying out research on psychosis. With the support of a Health Research Board (Ireland) Unit Grant and a Stanley Foundation (US) center grant, he began to build up a productive research group in Dublin. His favorite question to new trainees was “So what do you think causes schizophrenia?” and he actually seemed interested in what the most junior trainee had to say. He retained his passionate interest in epidemiology and his belief that this was the only way that the “big” questions in psychiatry could be solved. His MD thesis on obstetric complications and schizophrenia was followed by a DSc and FRCPsych. His academic achievements were honored by his appointment to a personal chair as Newman Professor of Mental Health Research in University College Dublin. He was awarded an International Gold medal by the Italian Cognitive Neuroscience Research Society in 2001. He had productive international collaborations with Fuller Torrey, Tom McNeil, Preben Bo Mortensen, and Pat McGorry among many others.

Eadbhard gradually began to focus more on clinical research and became concerned at the long duration of untreated illness among patients with psychosis. From 2001 he began a process of intense lobbying and persuasion that culminated in 2006 with the development of Ireland’s first early intervention service for psychosis—the Dublin and East Treatment and Early Care Team (DETECT, www.detect.ie). This service was established with seed funding from the Hospitaller Order of St John of God and additional funding from the Irish Health Service Executive. Between 2006 and 2011 Eadbhard was the clinical lead of DETECT and in that time he oversaw the assessment of over 700 referrals and the delivery of a phase-specific treatment to those newly diagnosed with a psychotic illness. This service has been so successful that the Health Service Executive is now considering rolling out a similar model in the rest of Ireland. In addition to his clinical work, Eadbhard continued to mentor a range of students and trainees. Eadbhard’s mantra was “Do the simple things well.” Eadbhard’s excitement about psychosis research and his desire to puzzle out answers to questions about the mind, society, and mental illness inspired many to change the direction of their lives and career. Eadbhard had a rare talent for relating to people in trouble. Indeed, his insight, his judgment and the kindness he showed to his patients were remarkable.

Eadbhard also became interested in an inclusive model of service incorporating early intervention for a wide range of illnesses. He was attending a Youth Summit in Killarney in May 2010 when he became ill. One short and very difficult year later he was dead. An Annual Youth Mental Health Research Prize has been established in his honor.

Eadbhard was a shy man who disliked public speaking, yet he lit up a room when he entered and was a memorable (though reluctant) speaker. He was intensely intellectual, yet had a passionate interest in sports and gardening and liked to explain complex scientific ideas in terms of the footballing tactics of Liverpool Football Club (of which he was a devoted supporter). He was also a skilful tennis player and enjoyed sailing and cycling, even managing to cycle some of the Tour de France route—a long-held ambition.

Eadbhard’s passing has left all who knew him, both colleagues and patients, with a great sense of loss. His family feel that loss most of all. He is survived by his wife Virginia and their four sons, Caolán (age 21), Oisín (age 19), Harry (age 16), and Eadbhard Jnr (age 9). He was so proud of his four sons and all they had achieved, and his wife, Virginia, was always the love of his life and a rock of support during that difficult final year.

There is of course one person who would disagree with most of the praise we have heaped upon him above and would have said quietly. “But surely you must be thinking of someone else.” Sadly, Eadbhard is not here to protest in his characteristically modest way, so we can hold all our memories of him without contradiction and say that we have known a wonderful and unusually good man. “Ní beidh a leithéid am arís”—we shall not see his like again.

Submitted by Mary Cannon, Associate Professor, Department of Psychiatry, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, Dublin, and Robin M. Murray, Professor of Psychiatric Research, Institute of Psychiatry, London. A shorter version of this piece was published in The Psychiatrist in May 2012 (doi:10.1192/pb.bp.112.039107). We acknowledge the help of Virginia and Caolán O’Callaghan, Conall Larkin, Niall Turner, Mary Clarke, and David Cotter.

Mary Cannon, MD, PhD
Department of Psychiatry
Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland
RCSI Education and Research Centre
Beaumont Hospital
Dublin 9, Ireland