

Covid-19 threatens to throw mental health services into disarray

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

By Niamh Griffin

MORE than half the centres catering for people with dementia cannot re-open due to social distancing rules, and families warn of the devastating impact of the lockdown on their loved ones.

About 64,000 people have dementia in Ireland, with Alzheimer's Disease the most common form. Most care is provided by the Alzheimer's Society in partnership with the HSE. Face-to-face services including two respite centres, 21 'Dementia Cafés' and activity centres have been shut or online since March.

One woman said her 62-year-old husband was devastated when their local centre closed, leaving him cut-off from his friends.

Tina Leonard, Head of Advocacy at the Alzheimer Society of Ireland, said funding announcements in the Budget were welcome, but warned: 'Level 5 restrictions makes no difference to what's available for people living with dementia and their families. Day services and other

'Some don't have access to the outside world'

face-to-face services never reopened after they closed in March and that remains the case. Carers have said to us that they are in a permanent lockdown anyway.'

She said many activities or classes are delivered in old buildings.

Ms Leonard will meet Health Minister Stephen Donnelly tomorrow to discuss this.

'Even if we are allowed to open, only one third of our centres would be in a position to re-open,' she said. 'We need a support fund to ensure premises can be compliant with new health and safety guidelines.'

Carmel Geoghegan, founder of Dementia Ireland, said pandemic guidelines for caring for people with dementia outside nursing homes are unclear.

She said: 'It is horrendous, devastating really. I see it with people I am in contact

DEVASTATING: Tina Leonard of the Alzheimer Society



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PETER PLESKACH was diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease at 56. The lockdowns brought mental anguish when a centre he calls 'my happy place' had to close.

His wife Frances said: 'He was devastated when it closed. He misses his friends. It was very difficult in April and May. He got out over the gates here in the house. He didn't understand why people couldn't go out - he got quite agitated about it.'

She said being around other people with cognitive impairments at the Le Cairde Alzheimer's Centre in Clonmel, Co. Tipperary, eased his embarrassment at forgetting words or losing this train of thought.

A former civil engineer, Peter, 62, can no longer remember how to read or write but staff at the centre re-ignited his love of puzzles and his hand-eye coordination improved.

He loved Le Cairde from the first visit, Frances said: 'He was transformed, he did not want to go home. He had the biggest smile; it was as if he found people who were in his world.'

When this lifeline was cut, Frances watched her husband struggle and lose his progress. Their adult children are broken-hearted, she said.

A carer from the centre started coming to their home in September, six hours a week in an effort to keep Peter connected. This is continuing under Level 5 with precautions.

Frances said: 'He watches for Sandra on the steps. He has his coat on and is waiting for her. There is light now that Sandra is coming into the house - it's a bit of normality for Peter but it is not enough.'

Frances stopped asking staff when the centre might re-open,

with. Some people are coping well, but others do not have access to the outside world, they have withdrawn completely.' Ms Geoghegan



'I LOVE HIM TO BITS': Frances and Peter Pleskach at home

Alzheimer's Centre was my husband's 'happy place' - he's gutted that it is closed

accepting they simply do not know.

'I love him to bits and I want to take care of him. I am grateful for what we have but he needs more,' she said.

Seamus Monahan, 82, faces a similar situation in Dublin. His daughter Denise said: 'It is

by the week he is declining; I feel we are in freefall now. The most heart-breaking of all is he doesn't know my brothers. I was in a bubble with my parents during the strict lockdown but when we opened up in May, he did not know them. That is very hard for them, it hurts.'

The siblings used to take Seamus to a Dementia Café once a week, travelling from their home in Tallaght to Glasnevin.

Denise said: 'We used to drive from Tallaght to Glasnevin, it was that good.'

'He had a coffee and chat, there was a great buzz from that.'

said she would like to see more support next month: 'I don't know why services couldn't be re-started with smaller groups. Maybe people could go on alternate days or go for half-days.'

Community hospitals in many counties used to offer respite for

dementia patients. Dr Clifford Haley, clinical director of the HSE Donegal Mental Health Services, said this is only available on an emergency basis now.

'It was high quality local provision. You can imagine if a person is facing challenges with dementia

that 14 days isolation is very difficult. There is a big burden of care now in the community,' he said.

Mental health services continue to run, but he said working remotely is challenging for older patients with dementia.

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Surge in visits to Irish Covid facts site

A WEBSITE countering fake coronavirus news has been visited by more than 10,000 people asking such questions as should they microwave schoolbooks or inject disinfectant to prevent infection.

A team of researchers and medics from around the country volunteer to investigate theories sent in by the public. They only take on claims being shared widely on social media. Project leader Elaine Finucane at

By Niamh Griffin

NUI Galway said each claim is rigorously checked out, with at least four people assessing the evidence before answers are posted online. Responses can be downloaded for sharing on Facebook or Twitter.

She said: 'Some of the recent claims are people asking about putting schoolbooks in the microwave - that

would be no. People need to be careful. Many books have a metal tag. This could go on fire if put in the microwave.'

The iHealth Facts website states that there is no scientific evidence doing this would disinfect a book.

The website also tackles the rumour that injecting disinfectant can protect humans against Covid-19.

The website states bluntly: 'There is no evidence that injecting

disinfectant prevents infection with or cures Covid-19... Do not under any circumstance inject, drink or inhale bleach or any other disinfectant.'

The researchers come mainly from NUI Galway but also University College Dublin, Trinity College, Limerick University, the Royal College of Surgeons Ireland and Solent University in England. They are supported by GPs, pharmacists and other medical experts.



DEBUNKER: Elaine Finucane of iHealth Facts