

Can we talk?

David Wright imagines a dialogue between the voices of substance misuse and mental health



Substance Misuse – ‘Why do we always fight?’

Mental Health – ‘Because I have enough on my plate without you trying to send us people who have chosen to ruin their lives.’

SM – ‘Some of these people have got mental health problems.’

MH – ‘Well that’s their problem. If they didn’t take drugs they would not end up messed up.’

SM – ‘How many of your patients have taken drugs?’

MH – ‘Well, er, quite a few, but they are merely self-medicating.’

SM – ‘What do you think my patients are doing?’

MH – ‘Your patients brought it on themselves.’

SM – ‘But when do my patients become your patients?’

MH – ‘If they become psychotic, when it presents itself as a recognised mental illness.’

SM – ‘But my patients try to self-medicate to stop this.’

MH – ‘Well if they did not mess with drugs they would not have to “self-medicate”.’

SM – ‘So you just treat the ones who are ill before taking any illegal chemicals?’

MH – ‘No I’m not saying that, we treat patients who have taken drugs before their illness.’

SM – ‘But you do refuse people psychiatric treatment if they are on drugs.’

MH – ‘Not if they are severely mentally ill.’

SM – ‘What about that man we brought to you last week? His GP had written a letter for emergency admittance, he did not have the ability to hold a conversation plus he was HIV positive so all the hostels did not want to know – and you turned him away?’

MH – ‘We were very busy that night, plus people like that on the ward complicate things and before you know it they are bringing drugs onto the ward.’

SM – ‘So you were happy that the man ended up back on the streets with no hope?’

MH – ‘Of course not, but if we admitted all of your referrals we would be out of beds in a day, and we’ve stretched our budget to the limit.’

SM – ‘You’ve hit the nail on the head. It all comes down to money not care.’

MH – ‘So what is the answer?’

SM – ‘I think it’s time the government had the balls to take drugs out of the black market and give more powers to doctors to prescribe.’

MH – ‘Hold on, you talking about legalisation?’

SM – ‘You have a better idea? More and more people are taking heroin and crack cocaine as we speak.’

MH – ‘But legalising it will make more people take drugs.’

SM – ‘The facts say the opposite, look at countries with liberal policies like Portugal and Germany compared with zero-tolerance countries like America. Per head of population, countries with stricter drug laws have far more drug abuse. People who think we are ever going to win the drugs war are insane.’

MH – ‘Well I suppose we’ve been fighting it since the 30s and it’s just got worse.’

SM – ‘The only way you will win it is to stop trying to fight the war and price the criminals out by giving the doctors the power to prescribe – ‘doctors not dealers’ – then spend the billions wasted on drug crime to build the beds and rehab centres with follow-on care.’

MH – ‘I agree we need a vast amount of money to build hospitals for those who want to come off drugs, and even have separate wards for those who have mental health problems as well.’

SM – ‘Yes and if we could also look into why people start to stick needles in their arms or spend all their money on crack, even if it means going without food or shelter, we might find a connection with mental illnesses, like depression for instance.’

MH – ‘I have a gut feeling it is because we live in such a competitive world which this government has encouraged. It’s left a lot of lost souls who do not want to compete.’

SM – ‘Hence escapism.’

MH – ‘We must team up and talk about how we can work together.’

SM – ‘Because we both aren’t in it for the money or we would be a lawyer or a politician.’

MH – ‘Or a drug dealer.’

David Wright is a member of Recovering Addicts Peer Support (RAPS), an independent peer support group based at In2change in Newport, South Wales. He is editor of the quarterly newsletter Offit, which can be viewed online from the Alliance’s website: www.m-alliance.org.uk