

THE UNSPEAKABLES

THEY arrive in cars with their relatives, spend a few hours in the community but never visit the shops or get involved with the locals.

These men are pariahs and possibly the only group in society against whom it is widely acceptable to hold a prejudice. Few would defend them because what they have done is indefensible.

They are men who have abused children, and they are trying to make amends. In cases where the victims are related to the abusers, families may be brought in to assist in the process.

"The vast majority are actually not callous psychopaths," says psychologist Dr Pat Walsh of his patients at the Granada Institute in

Crinken House, Shankill.

"They are ordinary people who go seriously wrong. They need help. They're basically people who want happiness."

Dr Walsh, who is Director of Psychological Services for the St John of God organisation as well as being director of the institute, can see child abuse from the victims' perspective as he spent the early part of his career, in the '70s, looking into the minds of troubled children and adolescents.

He also worked in other branches of psychology

before he was asked to take on the job of dealing with the perpetrators of sexual abuse when the Shankill centre opened in the '90s.

"Up to 60 per cent of them have themselves been abused as children," he told *Southside People*.

"We have to break that cycle by engaging with them."

Following assessment by Dr Walsh and his team of eight therapists, including psychologists, counsellors and social workers, the patients attend group sessions for about two years.

There are only four people in each group so the sessions are very intensive.

"They look at the damage they have caused; they look at the factors why they caused the abuse; look at how they're going to maintain an abuse-free life in the future."

Dr Walsh and his staff also treat two groups of convicted sex abusers who have been referred by the Probation and Welfare Service, but they meet at a city centre location.

There's a common perception that sex abusers can't be cured, but Dr Walsh is more optimistic – and with good reason.

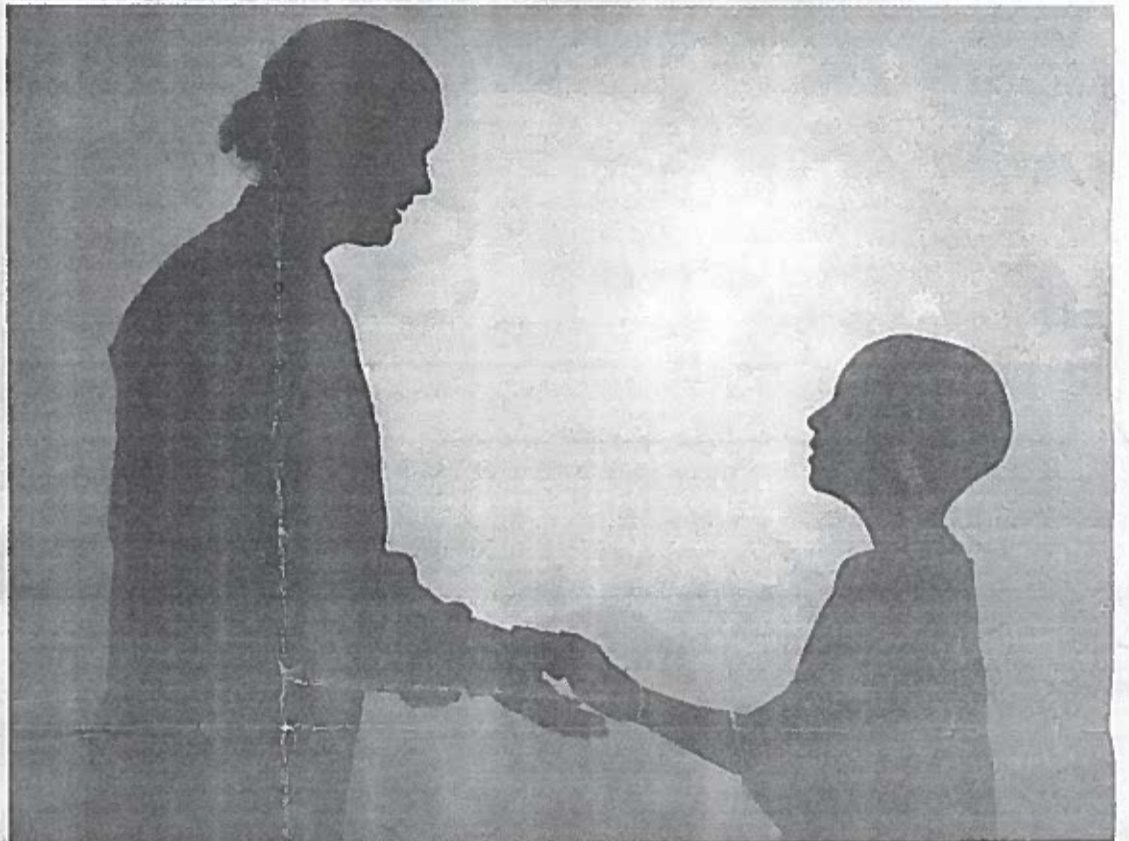
"When we talk about cure, we're usually talking about diseases. The people who attend here, many of them will have abused within the context of their own families."

"Most of the people that we see have abused in the past. An awful lot of them will have stopped abusing a long time ago without the treatment. The treatment is to reinforce that and to ensure that they are not at risk [of abusing again]."

"Of people who abused children, if they're caught 40 per cent may re-abuse, whereas when they're caught and treated, less than seven per cent re-abuse."

Like Mountjoy Prison Governor John Loneragan, Dr Walsh supports Justice Minister Michael McDowell's plans to make treatment for

THEY'VE COMMITTED THE MOST HEINOUS OF CRIMES BUT THEY AREN'T BEYOND REDEMPTION, ACCORDING TO A MAN WHO TREATS CHILD SEX ABUSERS



Children who have been abused need help to come to terms with the trauma

convicted sex-abusers compulsory in prisons.

Dr Walsh believes it is more effective than the prison sentence itself.

"A lot of people would feel that the treatment is harder than prison. First of all, you have to face up to what you've done – the shame, hurt and suffering that you caused. You have to face the people you hurt, you have to commit yourself to make good that suffering in the best way you can – you have to look at your own demons."

It's also tough on the families, of course – and not just the victims. Discussing the abuse with the one who

abused your child has to be the most painful experience imaginable, especially in cases when it's the father of that child.

Wives and partners of sex-abusers who have already gone through the heartbreak of discovering that the man they loved abused their child have to relive it all over again as they confront him years later with that now grown-up child who is still suffering.

"It's extremely painful for them," Dr Walsh says. "We have a support group for women who are partners or wives of men who've abused. They have queries: 'What is my role?' 'How did I not see it?' 'Do I support them having access to the children or not?' These women carry a big burden of responsibility for the whole family situation."

Above all, the women support each other.

"They're great," Dr Walsh says.

Despite having a job which involves listening to people unload decades of sadness, Dr Walsh doesn't find his work depressing.

"Despite the pain and suffering, it's great that people are very resilient as well – and they really respond to being given a helping hand. It's a real privilege to be close to people when they go through their life crisis."

It's easy to imagine that the patients also feel it's a privilege to have been lis-

tened to by Dr Walsh, who has the air of one who has heard it all, seen it all and still likes people.

It's not difficult to imagine a troubled person confiding in this man who apparently lacks cynicism but is not naive – and doesn't make excuses.

"The centre's priority is the protection of children," he points out.

"Our service is part of the child protection role of services."

He is quick to allay the fears of local residents who occasionally complain about the presence of the centre in Shankill, such as a local woman who recently contacted this newspaper to say she feared for the safety of her grandchildren.

"We are not having people wander through the village," Dr Walsh assures *Southside People*, adding that the patients' relatives accompany them to and from the centre. "We've made a commitment to the residents."

Dr Walsh has met residents' groups and visited schools to assure them that his patients would not be mingling with their children.

"We have good relations with the schools and school principals."

He also liaises with the gardai and all the patients have been vetted.

"We get referral letters, so we know the kind of people who are suitable."

He also believes his staff get a good idea of the characters of the patients through their families.

"The people we see have lived intimately with the person they abused."

Dr Walsh quotes from the SAVI report (Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland): that a quarter of the Irish population experienced sexual abuse as children.

More disconcerting still is the fact that child sex abusers don't fit into a stereotype.

They are not all priests or farmers living in isolation. Dr Walsh laughs gently at my misconception before pointing out that these stereotypes have become common because of high-profile cases such as that of the McColligan family.

"But we know that child sexual abuse happens in cities, towns, villages and country areas and that it's not confined to a small group and it happens to the best families."

He adds that they include well-educated people – and that most of the people he has treated are middle-class.

While Dr Walsh still believes Irish society has to confront the widespread presence of sexual abuse, he's glad that people are more open to talking about such formerly taboo subjects than they were when many of his patients were abusing their young victims.



PUBLIC NOTICE

APPLICATION FOR A PROPOSED RAILWAY ORDER BALLYFERMOT TO HAZELHATCH (KILDARE ROUTE PROJECT)

Under Section 42 (1) (a) of the Transport (Railway Infrastructure) Act, 2001 the Minister for Transport has established a Public Enquiry to be held into an application to him from the Board of Córas Iompair Éireann for the making of an Order, pursuant to the provisions of the Act. Mr Patrick Butler S.C. has been appointed by the Minister for Transport to act as Inspector at the Public Inquiry.

Under the provisions of Section 42 (1) (g) of the Act every interested person shall be entitled to appear and be heard at the inquiry. Alternatively, such parties may make a written submission, preferably four copies, to the inquiry.

Notice is hereby given that the inquiry will open at 10:00am on 24th January, 2006 at the premises of the Sheldon Park Hotel, Kylemore Road, Dublin 12.

It is proposed to hold a preliminary hearing of the inquiry at 14:00pm on 23rd January, 2006 at the same venue in order to explain procedural and other arrangements for the inquiry.

It is recommended that any person wishing to make a submission to the inquiry or to appear or be represented at the inquiry should contact the Secretary to the inquiry at the address below as soon as possible, but in any event not later than 16th January in order to facilitate arrangements for the inquiry.

Any person who intends to appear or be represented at the inquiry is invited to attend or be represented at the preliminary hearing. The right to make representations or the right to be represented at the inquiry will not be prejudiced by non-attendance or non-representation at the preliminary hearing.

Issued by order of the Inspector.

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Top psychologist Dr Pat Walsh works with men trying to make amends to children they have abused.