



● Addiction services

New report praises Safetynet

Ian McGuinness reports on a new study which has found that a pilot methadone programme for homeless people should be greatly expanded

A pilot programme to provide methadone services to homeless people at the Dublin Simon Emergency Shelter should be expanded to include five and a half times the number of patients, according to a report evaluating the project.

The programme is part of the Safetynet service, which involves GPs and nurses treating homeless people wherever they reside, as well as in doctors' surgeries.

The Simon Shelter wing of Safetynet began in December 2007 and involves the provision, by **Dr Kieran Harkin**, of methadone services to a maximum of 10 homeless people at a given time.

The Safetynet service

The review analysed the period from December 2007 to May 2008 and found that 14 people received treatment during that time. Ten were in treatment at the end of that period, two were transferred to **Dr Austin O'Carroll** elsewhere within the Safetynet service and two left the hostel and had no further contact with the initiative.

A maximum of 30 residents can be sheltered at the Simon community at any given time with an average of 26 being active drug users, most of them using heroin, the report said.

It noted: "Prior to the implementation of the Safetynet programme, less than one quarter of the Dublin Emergency Shelter residents were receiving any form of treatment."

Referring to the programme, it said: "The Methadone Protocol objective of reducing or stopping heroin use among programme participants was achieved. Other positive impacts included a reduction in the number of medical complications associated with illicit opiate use and a reduction in the number of residents evicted from the hostel and barred for unsafe drug use."

Reduction in criminal activity

It was also noted in the report that one of the significant results was the reduction of patients' involvement in criminal activity. In relation to their personal lives and health, it added: "There have also been improvements by some residents in level of contact with family, in motivation to attend stabilisation programmes and to source longer-term accommodation. Some residents have also started to attend hospital outpatient appointments and re-engage in education."

A notable reduction

The report noted that, of the 10 patients who were on the programme at the end of the six-month period, two had urine samples that were free of opiates or cocaine, while the other eight reported a notable reduction in drug use. It explained: "This reflected a reduction from an average pre-treatment six 'bags' of heroin daily to one-two 'bags' of heroin per week."

It said 15 more residents of

the shelter were eligible for the programme at the end of its evaluation, but they could not be accepted because all the places were full. Three of these were referred to Dr O'Carroll, five left the hostel and seven remained in the Simon building without treatment.

The document said little extra funding would be needed to increase the number of places from 10 to 55. The extra costs would be for the dispensing of methadone and the possible provision of a counselling service.

It added: "The benefits of treatment however will result in marked financial savings to the HSE and society in general."

Another recommendation of the report was that HSE drug treatment centres should accept the transfer of patients to them from the Safetynet service, when those individuals are deemed unsuitable for community-based treatment.

Dr Harkin told *Irish Medical Times* that meetings were taking place with the HSE about expanding the number of places in the Simon Shelter's Safetynet service, so that more residents could access it at any given time. He said: "We would be hopeful that it would expand to some extent... It is probably the most exciting project with which I've been involved."

The programme is continuing, with ten patients being treated simultaneously.

