



Down but every cent counts

A centre treating homeless alcoholics is keen to expand its services and transform the lives of more people, including drug addicts, but funding is a bigger problem than ever, writes **Noel Baker**

FALLING over is not typically seen as a lucky occurrence, but for Barry, a grandfather and alcoholic, the time he took a tumble in 2006 gave him a lesson in what drink was doing to his body — a lesson he is still learning.

A resident undergoing a rehab programme at the Simon Community's Rehab Detox centre, Barry (not his real name) laughs as he remembers the day his drinking prompted a life-saving diagnosis.

"I was drinking alone and I started to get headaches," he says. "I took a few tablets but the headaches got worse and I thought to myself, something's not right here. I had a mobile and I rang the ambulance with it.

"At the Beaumont Hospital later, they found two blood clots in my brain and I didn't know I'd had them at all."

Now heading into the autumn of his life, Barry began on the slippery slope that led him from social drinking to life on the streets, replete with beard and bushy, unkempt hair, when he separated from his wife two decades ago.

An incredibly articulate man, his accent betrays the years he spent in various places in England, but it is still anchored in his native Dublin. He was massively into music and moved in artistic circles. He wears a Liverpool FC hat and watch, reflecting his footballing allegiances, but it is his face that testifies to his hardships. In spite of the blotches and puffiness, it still fails to hinder the good-natured smile that seems to be its natural setting.

"I could not settle and drink became a crutch," says Barry, who admits that other members of his family have also suffered problems with alcohol, including a brother who is still drinking. "It caused more problems than it solved.

"Things get really difficult when you get on a one-to-one basis with the local gardai," he chuckles.

He is not averse to viewing the stark

impact of alcoholism on his life, however, claiming that the intoxicating daze results in "life passing you by".

"There is a feeling that there is no one to talk to, that no one understands my problems," he says.

This is where the Simon centre, secreted away behind a nondescript door on Usher's Island, plays a key role. In this building overlooking the River Liffey, at any one time up to two dozen people, including a growing number of women, are attempting to shake off their alcohol dependency.

The economic downturn has affected a number of charitable organisations, notably in terms of reduced revenue from fundraising. At the same time, core funding from the HSE has remained static.

The centre's manager, Maureen, admits that the shortage of funds "has affected every aspect, every line of the budget", although as things stand the present service level is not under threat. Nonetheless, the rota is being stretched and as few relief staff as possible are being utilised in an attempt to make every cent count.

This freezing of funds comes as polydrug use is more prevalent than ever. Maureen and Brenda, who oversee the detox programme, claim that while they only see those using alcohol or benzos, they do not feel that any success with clients is likely to be undermined if they are still using another substance.

"We would like to expand into [treating] drug and alcohol problems," Maureen says. "Drug detox is more

complex, it needs more staff and resources and we could do that here if we had the extra funding."

Any extra funding would allow them to treat people for methadone detox, as Maureen argues that many clients are stable on methadone and would be keen to move off it.

Brenda contends that there is no reason why double or treble the number of clients seen annually — approximately 34 as present — could not be catered for with sufficient funding. The centre has also had to introduce a "case closed" procedure which brings any aftercare to an end 12 months

after a client begins the detox cycle.

Getting a place on the programme also takes time and patience. Brenda explains: "Any one month we can have at least eight people waiting on a list, but there would be a backlog on top of that."

Waiting times of up to four months are not uncommon, and the longer the delay the less the motivation on the part of the client to battle their addiction.

The centre has 12 detox beds for those undertaking the three week course, and 12 rehab beds for the duration of the three month course.

Once the clients have completed phase one and two they are given help in trying to secure accommodation or may stay at one of the three aftercare houses around the city operated by Simon.

The centre operates with three project workers and four full-time volunteers, including Clemence, a 22-year-old from Toulouse in France who readily admits that aspects of work with the Dublin homeless community has confounded many of her expectations.

"I did not expect to see a lot of drug users like that [here]," she says.

"In the shelter [at another location in the city] there are some people who are only 20."

She also expresses surprise that clients are allowed to drink in some homeless shelters, but also concedes that on a macro level the Irish relationship with drink is different to that in France.

"When people relapse it can be very hard — they can go back to zero," she says.

Relapses do occur, and the failure rate increases as time passes: while 80% of clients complete the detox programme without succumbing to alcohol (only two clients have dropped out at this stage since last November), that falls to 60% during the three months of rehab and drops to between 20% and 25% in aftercare.

The aftercare houses are provided on a contract basis to clients; they can

have one slip-up and stay in the premises, but a second incident means they must leave and, in all likelihood, begin the process all over again.

Barry remembers the occasion he relapsed having gone through the cycle first time around in 2006. Following his treatment for the blood clots in his head, he fell off the wagon when old pals invited him along for a drinking session as he struggled to fend off the boredom.

Now, however, he is confident that this time he will stay the course and refrain from going back to the "cans of misery" that have had an acidic effect on his life in recent decades.

To a soundtrack of a women singing down the corridor and consumptive coughing from another resident puffing on a gasper outside, Barry says: "Oh yes, you're definitely going to get a positive from me."



A homeless alcoholic begging at Merchant's Arch in Dublin. The economic downturn has affected a number of charitable organisations that aim at helping alcoholics free themselves of their dependency.

Picture: Frank Miller

