

# 60 Second Interview

## SECTION ONE: Biography



**Patrick D. McGorry** is Executive Director of Orygen Youth Health (OYH), Australia's largest youth mental health organisation, based in Parkville, Victoria, Professor of Youth Mental Health at the University of Melbourne and founding member of the National Youth Mental Health Foundation (headspace) board. OYH comprises a world-renown research centre and a clinical service targeting the needs of young people with emerging serious mental illness.

Prof. McGorry has published over 300 papers and book chapters, edited five books, and serves as Editor-in-Chief of Early Intervention in Psychiatry. He is a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia and has been the recipient of numerous awards, including: Australian of the Year 2010. With an emphasis on early intervention and a commitment to educating the community to the early signs of mental illness, Professor McGorry's extraordinary 27-year contribution has transformed the lives of tens of thousands of young people with emerging serious mental illness, the world over.

## SECTION TWO: Question & Answer

**Question 1: What's your Irish background and do you still consider yourself Irish or Australian or both?**

I was born in Dublin and my family are from Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal originally. We still have a tiny piece of land in Cavan near Lough Sillan. I'd describe myself as Irish Australian as I feel very much at home in both of these unique and wonderful countries.

I was brought up in a very Irish way and I think my temperament and thinking patterns are distinctly Irish. Since I've studied psychiatry, I do recognise that there are emotions and patterns of thought that are very unique to Ireland and I think these are associated with flexibility and creativity. It is a poetic style which has a lot in common with the people of the southern parts of Europe such as Spain and Italy, more so than northern Europe.

**Question 2: How has your Irish heritage defined you?**

It has defined me as a social person who seeks out company, the love of conversation and the egalitarian notion that no one is any better than anyone else – which is also a very Australian trait. Perhaps I should say that every one is as **good** as everyone else to avoid the tall poppy problem! I'm still very strongly attached to Ireland – but Australia is a truly fantastic society and I'm lucky to be able to connect my heritage and that of my 3 sons, Liam, Niall and Fionn, (all musicians!) to both countries.

**Question 3: What did it mean to you to be named 2010 Australian of the Year?**

It was a huge honour and most unexpected! Most importantly, it's an honour that I am proud to share with so many other people who have contributed to mental health care and reform – the true believers!

**Question 4: What impact has this accolade had on your research and advocacy work?**

I'm very happy and appreciative of this accolade, but mainly as an opportunity to be more effective. I am in a better position now to give a voice to all the people who suffer from mental illness and who have had a very raw deal in terms of the care and support they receive within our otherwise very lucky country. So, this year is all about using that voice to raise more public awareness around mental health issues and also to extract vastly better government funding and focus on improving accessibility to services for youth mental health especially.

The healthcare system in Australia is very lopsided when it comes to comparing the support for physical and mental health services – only 35% of those with mental health disorders get any access to treatment compared to 90% of patients that suffer from physical illnesses. So, the healthcare system needs to be vastly reformed and rebalanced. Since 75% of mental health disorders first affect people before the age of 25, this is where effective treatments can really make a difference if mental ill-health is detected and treated in its the initial stages. Our system currently is one of late intervention focused on middle aged people with severe disability.

To our shame, these figures have not changed at all in the past ten years. According to the 2007 Australian Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, 35% of people with mental disorders gained access to some form of treatment, whereas in 1997, this figure sat at 38% which shows that there have been no real improvements. Massive changes and substantial investment are still required to make a dent in these statistics.

**Question 5: What involvement have you had with youth mental health reform in Ireland?**

I'm a board member of Headstrong, an organisation that was set up in 2006 to change the way Ireland thinks about and tackles youth mental health. We work with communities in Ireland to ensure that young people aged twelve to twenty five are better supported to achieve better mental health and wellbeing as they journey into adulthood. Headstrong is a sister organisation to headspace in Australia and these are the only two countries so far to focus on this type of model, even though all countries face these huge public health challenge in their young people. This reflects the innovative nature of the Irish and of Australians and demonstrates our international leadership.

This year will see the first international youth mental health summit in Killarney in May and the first international youth mental health conference in Melbourne in July.

Headstrong is currently funded by a combination of major and visionary private philanthropic investment largely from the One Foundation, more recently from Atlantic Philanthropy and as also other local Irish community leaders concerned about the mental health of local youth; government funding; as well as the commitment of modest but hopefully increasing resources from the HSE. The latter is a crucial next step as progress will falter without government backing and associated mental health service reform and investment linking with Headstrong.

**Question 6: How has the current economic situation in Ireland impacted on youth mental health and how can it be addressed?**

Ireland still has a long way to go in terms of mental health reform. New funding schemes are needed to make some real impact and there is still a lot of stigma associated with mental health in Ireland due to a lack of public awareness campaigns. Despite positive media interest recently, mental ill health is rarely talked about properly in the public domain, and the system has not come very far in the past 50 years as much of it still operates within archaic services such as the 19<sup>th</sup> century asylums.

Despite recent prosperity the opportunity was missed to invest in a modern health system beyond hospitals and this failure has been especially costly to the mental health field and the large number of Irish people, well over 1 million, who are affected each year. This includes most seriously the teenagers and young adults aged 12 – 25 years.

Investment and mental health education really needs to be scaled up dramatically with fresh injections of funding. Ireland also needs to ensure that any investment is spent wisely by focusing on teenagers and young adults as this is where it can really make a huge difference and show great returns, both in human and economic terms.

**Question 7: What drives you professionally?**

I'm highly motivated by being able to make a real difference to the lives of individuals and families. It's exciting and also highly rewarding to be able to assist with providing real solutions to the suffering of mental illness. I am a very fortunate but impatient person!

**Question 8: What's the best piece of advice you've been given?**

Take time to listen as you can learn something from everyone you meet. And never never give up – hang in there until you win the battle. Nothing worthwhile seems to result without struggle so have the confidence and get the support to make sure you win! The world is full of very talented and intelligent people, many of whom fail to achieve anything. The essential ingredient to success I believe is persistence.

**Question 9: Who has been your greatest inspiration?**

There are a lot of people that I find hugely inspirational; the ones I most admire are those who have dedicated their lives to facing issues of social injustice, abuse, cruelty and discrimination.

Mahatma Gandhi would be top of my list, followed by Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King and the generations of leaders in Ireland who fought for the rights and freedom of the Irish people, notably O'Connell, Davitt, Parnell and Michael Collins (especially because he was successful!). I also find the voyage of Ernest Shackleton to South Georgia and his survival extraordinary and inspirational.

From a professional perspective, Professor Beverley Raphael, who was the Foundation Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Newcastle where I began my training in psychiatry, and my other mentor Prof Bruce Singh, inspired me greatly in the early days of my career due to their shared commitment to optimism and prevention in mental health care.

From a personal perspective my wonderful parents and my wife Marilyn and three sons have been huge sources of inspiration as have my friends and colleagues here in Australia and around the world. The large numbers of people I have met with mental illness and ill health have inspired me too with their courage and resilience despite the suffering they have had to face.

**And one for good luck...** If you could talk to one person from history, who would it be and what question would you ask them?

Well we know the Irish saved civilisation but I would like to ask St Brendan: "Did you really make it to America? And back again?"

**Thank you for your time!**