

WORLD SUICIDE PREVENTION DAY

As World Suicide Prevention Day is marked today, Health Correspondent **Anne Madden** hears how families affected by suicide are frustrated at the response of statutory services



■ **FRUSTRATION:** Philip McTaggart at his north Belfast home yesterday with a picture of his son Pip whom he lost to suicide

FACTFILE

More people die from suicide than as a result of war each year, according to the World Health Organisation

The latest official statistics available for 2002 show that 613 people took their own lives in Ireland

There are an average of 150 deaths each year in the north – the vast majority of whom are male

In the north, suicide and self-harm account for more than 4,000 hospital admissions and cost the economy £170 million annually.

Serious action needed before it is too late

AT least 10 people took their own lives within eight weeks in north Belfast at the start of this year. The grim toll culminated in the harrowing suicides of teenage friends Anthony O'Neill and Bernard Cairns – the latter taking his life just hours after burying his friend.

North and west Belfast were already registered as black spots for suicide in Ireland, with an above average number of cases per head of population.

The cluster of suicides was a chilling start to the new year. The only comfort was that this would be a catalyst for serious action.

However, eight months later the most concerted efforts to tackle the problem are being taken by concerned residents and religious figures. People have continued quietly to take their own lives – with a ripple of public interest now and then – and families and communities have been left struggling to pick up the pieces.

Philip McTaggart helped found a group in a bid to fill a major gap in statutory service provision.

Following the suicide of Philip's own 17-year-old son, Pip, the Public Initiative for the Prevention of Suicide and Self-Harm (PIPS) was set up last year as an emergency response for affected families.

It grew out of the North Belfast Partnership Board, which provides one worker, Jo Murphy but otherwise PIPS is driven by the zeal of a grieving father. "We are inundated with calls," Mr McTaggart said.

"It is so frustrating – we are just a voluntary group, we can't cope with it all ourselves.

"Why is there no-one in the health board taking the initiative? There is really nothing going on in terms of prevention programmes to reduce suicides," he said.

The ineffectiveness of health authorities, Mr McTaggart said, was highlighted disturbingly by Pips' discovery of suicide awareness leaflets sitting in an office belonging to North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust (NWBHSST).

The group was informed that 'no-one had been able to deliver them', so Pips volunteers took the box and immediately distributed the leaflets door to door in north Belfast.

"We have dealt with over 200 cases who have thought about or attempted suicide since Christmas," Mr McTaggart said.

"But there are times when we can't get anyone to talk to the person or get

Black balloons fill the sky as grim statistic is revealed

ATOTAL of 132 black balloons will fill the sky over Belfast City Hall at midday today to mark the number of suicides in the north last year.

The balloon launch has been organised by a north Belfast voluntary group to mark International Suicide Prevention Day. The Pips group (Public Initiative for the Prevention of Suicide and Self-harm) was set up last year in response to the high number of suicides in north Belfast. Lord Mayor Tom Ekin hosted a reception for Pips at the city hall yesterday ahead of today's events.

"There is a total lack of understanding among many people about suicide and the terrible impact it has on families and communities," Mr Ekin said.

The mayor supported calls at the reception, which was attended by bereaved relatives, for a regional action plan to tackle suicide.

Pat McGreevey, from Down Lisburn Health and Social Services Trust, presented the grim statistics on suicide which average 150 each year – consistently higher than the number of deaths from road accidents. The latest available figures for road deaths are for 2002 when there were 121 fatalities, compared to 162 suicides that year.

"Perhaps it is because of the stigma surrounding suicide but there is not the same emphasis on preventing suicide as there is on preventing road deaths," Mr

McGreevey said.

Ardoyne priest Fr Aidan Troy has suggested the establishment of an out-of-hours mental health team, similar to BelDoc, the area's out-of-hours GP service.

"People don't self-harm between nine and five, Monday to Friday," Fr Troy said.

"We need a service like BelDoc, an immediate response team that can help families cope in the aftermath of a suicide or attempted suicide – we need professionals."

One young girl who took her life earlier this year had sat in A&E for two hours before leaving the hospital and killing herself.

There are many similar stories reverberating around north and west Belfast, which reflect a community that



■ **LOSS:** Sharon Brady from Belfast at the city hall yesterday where she described the devastation of losing her brother to suicide

McGreevey said. "There is a growing recognition that a proactive government should take the initiative and set up a regional suicide prevention plan."

Sharon Brady, from Belfast, who lost her brother to suicide, described how she regained her confidence through the support of Pips.

"Organisations like Pips need support because they are doing a lot of work to help people like my family who have

feels no-one cares.

In May two leading mental health doctors from the USA visited north Belfast to assess youth suicide in the area and come up with recommendations. The doctors' visit was funded by an American charity, the Children of Ireland Group, which was very concerned about the cluster of suicides and generally high rate of self-harm in the area.

Their report was highly critical of the statutory response to the problem, particularly from NWBHSST.

The doctors found that current programmes focused overwhelmingly on crises and a number of agencies were duplicating the work of other organisations.

Only one organisation, Pips, was dealing directly with youth suicide and yet

suffered the devastation of losing someone," she said.

CONTACTS:
Pips: 028 90752990
www.pipsproject.com
Cookstown support group, Joan Hunter: 028 8676 7105
Cruse Bereavement Care: 028 9043 4600
Samaritans: 028 9066 4422 or 08457 90 90 90

this received no funding from the trust.

The others addressed youth trauma, mentoring, peer education and overall mental health but the doctors argued that these were not substantive prevention programmes.

This criticism has also been expressed by families of those affected by suicide.

Jim McComb from west Belfast – whose 18-year-old son Michael took his life earlier this year – said his depressed son might still have been alive if there had been more counselling services available.

The trust said it "recognises that an ongoing and coordinated prevention strategy is the best way to tackle suicide". It described its strategy as "maximising economic growth; improving services; enhancing interpersonal

skills of young people; increasing public understanding of depression and suicide and promoting positive mental health".

The trust employs a full-time mental health promotion officer but has also consistently argued that its mental health budget is £3 million underfunded compared to other areas.

In conjunction with The Samaritans, the trust ran a successful advertising campaign, 'If Your Head's Away', which encouraged young people to seek help and led to 40,000 hits on its information website.

But this only ran for a limited period, being re-run for one day to mark World Suicide Prevention Day today.

Mr McTaggart said this was clearly not enough.

"More people in Ireland die from suicide than road traffic accidents, so in the same way there should be continual advertising and awareness campaigns," he said.

Criticism of statutory services is not confined to Belfast.

Mother-of-six Joan Hunter, from Cookstown, Co Tyrone, started a support group for families bereaved by suicide after the loss of her son, Shane.

"There have been a lot of suicides in the mid-Ulster area, particularly of boys under 25 but there doesn't seem to be anything being done to tackle the problem," she said.

Mrs Hunter said she received excellent support from bereavement charity Cruse and her GP but relied heavily on family and friends to come to terms with the tragedy.

"My youngest child was put on a waiting list for a bereavement counsellor after Shane's death in September 2001 but we still haven't heard from anyone," she said.

Sitting in the Holy Cross monastery in Ardoyne, where so many desperate friends and relatives have banged on the door seeking help for a suicidal loved one, Fr Troy ponders the future.

"The structures are being developed slowly but meanwhile John, Joe, Mary and Sheila are self-harming tonight in north Belfast and throughout Ireland," he said.

"The big plan hasn't been drawn up yet – well maybe we should be building the structure from the bottom rather than the top?"

"We haven't seen any signs either that the root cause has been removed or that it (a cluster) will never happen again. It is quite likely that there could be another cluster – we can't expect the same forgiveness next time, we have already had a severe warning."