## LABOUR PARTY FRINGE MEETING

### On behalf of VOX in partnership with the Royal College of Psychiatrists and the Royal College of Nursing.

### MARCH 08

Hello, as has been said my name is Graham Morgan I am speaking as a member of VOX, which is Scotland's national voice for people who have experienced mental illness.

I have a diagnosis of Schizophrenia, but generally I keep very well. My job is to work with the Highland Users Group, which represents the views of people with experience of mental ill health in the Highlands. You can find out more about us by visiting hug.uk.net or by visiting VOX at vox Scotland.org.uk

I've been asked to talk on the issue of whether we have enough health professionals with particular reference to psychological treatments. To start, I'll begin with what may seem like a tangent.

Two years ago I was sitting in one of our members houses holding a meeting just after the New Year. One of the people there was still celebrating and was very drunk but as he talked he said that for him life had become pointless, he was in his fifties and had not been in any form of close relationship since his early twenties, the colour and vibrancy of this world had leached out of his existence and all he now had was loneliness with nothing whatsoever to look forward to. He died a week later and I hope that his death came as some form of release for him.

A year ago I was wondering around our branches finding out our members opinions on a variety of subjects and at each meeting Lizzie one of our members asked how many of our members were in a close relationship. The answers were shocking and sad. So few of our members had any close or intimate relationship. We all know how horrific mental illness can be but add on loneliness and isolation and it grows extra arms; not to have a hug, a kiss, no one to hold and be held by, no one to argue over what to watch on the television and no one to fall asleep next to in the shared warmth of a bed, maybe, for some people, this is fine but for others it is a perpetual loss.

Two weeks ago one of our members returned from study in another area and was talking about how hard it was to get re-referred to see the mental health professionals that she used to see and as she talked she said how little there

was to look forward to, work for so many of us is an impossibility and a distant sparkle that we hesitate to even contemplate but without activity and in some areas without any drop in service to go to we can find ourselves lost in the empty caverns of our own rooms.

And lastly, a week ago I visited a group called Healthy Minds here in Aviemore and heard a great voice of joy at the liberation of being a part of a group which is run by its members for its members, where people socialise, go out, learn from each other and when they can't find answers call in people who can provide them, it's a group which for some people demonstrates the power of looking to our strengths and the possibility of recovery. It is good sometimes to hear of success stories.

So a little laboured, but what messages do I have? The need for professional help is without doubt hugely important to us but it needs to be seen in the context of our wider lives , CPN's, psychologists, psychiatrists and support workers can transform our lives but they  and we can be seriously hindered by the lives and the environment that we live in. To provide help with the illnesses we have is not just a question of pills or CBT.  It means addressing all the bits that add up to trap us in lives that are hard to cope with.  Sadly for some of us it is the professionals who help, us who become the key companions in our lives and that distort so much. When you live on the margins and have lost hope and connection the input of our helpers can be hugely restricted and confined just because life can become so bleak and filled with a poverty of no expectation.

When we talk about the need for health workers we need to put it in the context of cultural change. We need of course to dispel stigma and lack of awareness; Some of the myths the public hold about people like me are precisely those things that isolate us, some of the guilt we feel is the stuff that makes us feel we neither deserve nor will benefit from help. Some of the stereotypes mean that we lose hope and lose the gift of believing in a future or celebrating the strengths that we do have and lastly some of societies beliefs just make us shudder and hunker away from the gaze of those who say that we would all flourish and grow if only we returned to formal employment and regained the value of contributing and being ordinary and normal again.

In HUG we have periodically asked officials about how the spend on mental health services in all their variety are worked out. We had the fond vision that there was some sort of formula that would demonstrate what should be spent across the country and within our own areas. But the answers we get back tell of historical accident and political fashion and the efforts of a variety of different champions. Do we need more health professionals? It depends who you are, if you are a child on the west coast suffering in the extreme and your family finds out that there is only one mental health worker who specialises in young peoples mental health for hundreds of square miles then the answer is obvious. If you are living through a crisis and get to a Friday evening with dread in your heart at facing the weekend only to see all those that are there to help heading home to their wine, whisky and families, the answer is again obvious. If you have struggled with the so deadening, so draining grey life of depression and your treatment consists of seeing a GP for five or ten minutes

and who only has pills to offer then the answer is again obvious; in fact it may become more than obvious; the question may become plain old insulting. When you find yourself referred for talking treatments and in that bright offer think at last there may be a way out, you've heard of it, you know that talking treatments can be as good as or even better than medication but then the months stretch by and even the years come and go and still there is no appointment and, that is when being asked, do we need more professionals becomes such an insult. But then I talked about cultural change, I shouldn't really as it is so easy to say if we just worked better, thought better, shifted our attitudes then life could change without too much investment. Smacks of the kind of constant reviews that say do things different but do it without any new money.

I talked of fashion; 30 years ago there were 1500 people in the nearest hospital to this conference, now there are around 70 in the acute wards. In the area of health we assume that what is invested is done so on accurate scientific assessments of need and yet its not. The discharge of people from long term care was to my mind a reflection of social responsibility and moral need as much as it was a reflection of health innovation. The current investment in services for people with a mental illness and in services that promote wellbeing is just as much a reflection of the need we in society see needs to be provided for some of our most vulnerable citizens as it is of a concrete assessment of need. We the public, the politicians and policy makers should have as much say in what the definition of need is as any formal assessment can provide, we all know the one in four message, we all now are realising that not only have all of us been affected by mental illness either directly or by people close to us but equally we all have differing levels of well being and a responsibility, if not the knowledge to care for this hugely important aspect of our health. But when I say this I ask, where is all the work going on to help all of us deal with wellbeing and the simple things that can improve life for us and those around us.

So do we have enough workers? Do we have enough investment in mental health? I don't know; how important is mental health to us? How important is social justice when we think of a community of people who have been marginalised for years, how important are those little things that can lift people out of isolation and the poverty of a featureless life? That is something we all have a responsibility to consider and reflect on. Maybe as we all become aware that it is us and our friends who experience mental ill health and not just the stereotypes on the television screen then maybe we can talk about it all more rationally.

I was diagnosed with Schizophrenia fifteen years ago. In those days treatment seemed to be based almost entirely on encouraging us to take medication, and if we didn't comply, providing us with fortnightly injections to make sure that we did. I had a huge need to speak, to talk, to understand, to find some explanation and meaning for what I was going through, but in those days, this was considered counter productive. I remember my pleas for someone to talk to being conveyed up the ladder of the hierarchy of the different doctors only to come back with the constant repetition that this would not be appropriate.

Some years later, this time seeing a consultant, who seemed more like a friendly uncle than someone in charge of my care, I slipped briefly into the world of depression and was told that rather than give me pills I would be referred for cognitive behavioural therapy. That was fine by me, the less pills I take the better. A year later I was still waiting to see someone and by the time I finally did see a psychologist my depression had lifted and we both agreed that the need for me to be cognitivised was not necessary but, seeing her was wonderful; I had the chance to look at my illness and my attitudes to it in a safe warm non judgemental atmosphere. These few weeks of having a professional to talk to transformed the way that I deal with my condition.

I am lucky I have an illness that is one of the glossy priorities for treatment in the world of mental illness but there are so many people who do not get the treatment that could help them. Many of our members have a diagnosis of personality disorder something that used to be known as the dustbin diagnosis, the diagnosis that wrote you off and discarded you. Now we know that there are talking therapies that do help but the number of people able to deliver it are few and far between. Perhaps the biggest population of people with a mental illness are those with depression. It can be the worst of all illnesses and yet it is one of the most common it can debilitate and yet people with it can often continue working and functioning albeit with difficulty, but this illness which is so widespread and which we know there are effective treatments for seems to get swept aside almost as though it is not as important as other illnesses, the words of mild to moderate illness or that awful phrase the "worried well" trivialises what is an absolutely awful experience. So many people go through this and receive little help either for them or their family but depression touches so much, our ability to work, and motivation to do anything, be it cook, go out, meet friends, make love, to see anything bright in our future and although medication and other treatments do help we need to look at all that is around us because without help all the bleakness reinforces itself and the sadness mushrooms. We need to provide those things that vary from individual to individual, those things that help them grow and find glimmers of dignity in the world around them , this can be basic education that lets people realise that recovery does occur even though we may not believe it, it can be the small steps that build on our strengths rather than focus on our impairments, it can be finding shared experience from other people or the small encouragements that help us get exercise and look after the physical health which is so poor in the community of those with mental illness. It can be a whole myriad of things

I'll finish where I began, do we need more health professionals? It depends on your perspective. How important is it to offer and provide meaningful help to the horror of mental illness; that is a judgement we all need to make? Self harm has become a glib word but when I was self harming by stubbing cigarettes out on myself that was akin to torture, with the exception that I was the torturer. That incomprehensible action is an indication of just how bad our worlds can be, so if you were asking me I would say we need all we can get, we have been poorly funded for generations, the services we need to flourish are always gasping for money, the realisation that we all need to deal with emotional health is, to be honest, brand new as an idea to far to many people. But what did it for me? After a horrendous few years in my twenties I lived symptom free for a number of years and the reason? I fell in love – I had

someone who valued and needed me, someone who would run along a crowded café to throw herself into my arms, someone to be silly with and pretend to fly with, someone to care for and be cared for by. That for me was my liberation and that is my final message: mental wellbeing and mental illness is not all about resources and numbers of workers, though that is important, it is about all of us.