

# A stride for pride

The first INMO LGBT conference pushed for equal rights for all and a greater understanding of LGBT issues. **Gillian Tsoi** reports

"It is critical for LGBT members to have a sense of peace and belonging in the workplace," said Liam Doran, general secretary of the INMO. He was speaking at the Organisation's first LGBT conference, which took place on June 21 to coincide with the Dublin Pride festival.

Mr Doran admitted that the INMO has come "rather belatedly to the subject" of LGBT rights, but said it is now committed to "pushing for greater tolerance and a greater understanding" of LGBT issues in the nursing and midwifery community.

The inaugural LGBT conference – held in Dublin's Gresham Hotel – was organised by the INMO's LGBT Organising Committee, Clare Treacy, INMO director of social policy, James Geoghegan, INMO second vice president, and Executive Council members, David O'Brien, Martin McCullough and Mary Barrett.

The event was jointly chaired by Clare and James and featured a variety of speakers, who offered their expertise on a range of LGBT matters. The conference addressed the daily reality of discrimination and fear facing LGBT nurses and midwives and the detrimental effect that this has in their workplaces and personal lives.

Despite significant progress in the law and increasing public support for LGBT rights and recognition in Ireland, the reality of the 'lived experience' can be harsh.

## Be proud of who you are

At the conference, Jerry Buttimer, TD and Chair of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health and Children, talked about the importance of equality in the workplace and gave his personal account of being one of the first openly-gay politicians in Leinster House.

According to Deputy Buttimer, it is imperative that the difficulties LGBT people face in the workplace are overcome.

"The goal of this conference is to underscore how important sexual orientation and gender identity are for nurses, midwives, and for the health service in general. The very decision to hold this conference is a positive one, and one that will help to foster and to drive a new

attitude and new culture around LGBT issues."

He added: "I do hope that others, be they community organisations, trade unions, sporting bodies and civic society, will follow today."

"Nurse and midwives are key supports for patients during treatment and hospitalisation. Your role is crucial in ensuring that LGBT people can access health services without having to hide who they are."

Deputy Buttimer talked about Section 37 of the Employment Act, which he said needs to be changed in order to remove LGBT discrimination from the workplace.

"As a gay person teaching in a school, I can be fired under Section 37 of the Employment Act," he explained.

"Twenty-first century Ireland is one that I genuinely hope is gentler, tolerant and respectful. One where we can live in safety and security in the workplace, playing an active role in the construction of a new, caring Ireland, in our communities where we live and socialise," he said. "Thankfully, the experience of so many LGBT people nowadays is positive, and is not one where misery, fear and isolation prevails."

"My journey in life is no different to so many in this room," he said. "It began with unease and fear surrounding my sexuality. Thankfully, it has moved to one that is absolutely full; to being supported by so many through acceptance; and to being at peace with myself internally."

## Keynote address

Providing the keynote address at the conference was Michael Cashman, MEP, who co-founded Stonewall – the largest LGBT equality organisation in Europe. Mr Cashman was elected to the European parliament in 1999. A decade before, in 1989, the former *EastEnders* actor caused a media storm and fury in the House of Commons when his character kissed his on-screen boyfriend – the first pre-watershed gay kiss on British television.

Mr Cashman gave his perspective on Ireland's LGBT record to date and outlined the necessary steps required before full equality is realised in this country for both

LGB and transgender people.

He said: "Far too often transgender and transexuality gets dropped out of the equation, but transphobia is alive, it's real, and like homophobia, it blights people's lives, and in some instances, it takes their lives."

Mr Cashman told the conference that Irish people need to put pressure on the government to ensure that the Horizontal Framework Directive is implemented by the EU to legally protect LGBT people from discrimination.

He said: "There is so much more to us than our sex lives. We are from the traditional family: we are aunts, uncles, mothers, brothers, sisters... We have co-existed with heterosexuality since procreation began and if they really want to stop us, then they should just stop procreating."

## LGBT in the nursing community

Meanwhile, Dr Mel Duffy, sociology and sexuality studies lecturer at DCU, presented her research on the reality of being gay or lesbian in the fields of nursing and midwifery. She demonstrated how isolated gay and lesbian nurses and midwives can feel in work.

According to the research, if society constantly presumes heterosexuality, both in the workplace and outside, then we are forcing our gay and lesbian colleagues to make a statement about their sexuality or to hide it. The research suggests the latter is the preferred option in these instances.

Dr Duffy said that 'being 'out' in the workplace can improve productivity, and that employers must keep this in mind and ensure appropriate diversity policies are in place.

"If people are not able to be themselves in a job, they will under-perform. It is essential for patient care that our staff are happy in their working environment," said Dr Duffy.

## Marriage equality matters

Moninne Griffith, director of Marriage Equality, spoke about the importance of marriage equality, and how individuals in Ireland can play their part in legalising marriage for gay couples.

Marriage Equality has been fighting for civil marriage for same-sex couples since



*Pictured (l-r) speaking at the INMO's first LGBT conference were (top row) Clare Treacy, INMO director of social policy; Michael Cashman, MEP; Jerry Buttimer TD; Marian Harkin MEP; (bottom row) Marianne McGiffin, OWLS; Dr Mel Duffy, lecturer, DCU; Moninne Griffith, Marriage Equality; and Odhrán Allen, GLEN*

2008. Since its inception, public support for the cause has risen from 58% to 74%.

Ms Griffith said that the availability of civil partnership for same-sex couples does not constitute equal rights. "This underscores a stigma that there's something inherently wrong with being LGBT, this separate system for relationship recognition," she said.

There are more than 160 statutory differences between civil partnership and civil marriage. "If you can't get married, your family isn't recognised as a family... and there's a whole plethora of rights and protections that flow from that."

These differences include legal matters relating to the family home, dependent children, desertion protection, financial issues, and the formation and dissolution of relationships.

According to Ms Griffith, "the most harrowing differences" between marriage equality and civil partnership are parent-child gaps relating to adoption, access, maintenance and inheritance rights.

It is hoped that a referendum on marriage equality will be called in 2014.

"I feel confident that Irish people will do the right thing, and that they will vote for equality, and vote to respect and protect same-sex families. We need everyone to play their part to get this across the line," said Ms Griffith. "Say 'yes' to equality and say 'yes' to love."

#### **Older, wiser lesbians**

Also at the conference was Marianne McGiffin, a retired nurse and chairperson of OWLS (Older Wiser Lesbians). She spoke engagingly about her own struggle with 'coming out'. Marianne did not come out publicly until she had retired in 2010. She said that not coming out in work created a feeling of exclusion.

She told the conference that "coming out is a process, not an event". She said that this process involves three stages: coming out to yourself; coming out to others; and coming out in public.

Ms McGiffin is now committed to running OWLS, which provides a nationwide online support network for lesbians over the age of 40. The organisation also runs

social events for its membership, which tallies up at around 150 people.

#### **LGBT inclusive healthcare**

Odhrán Allen, director of mental health at GLEN (the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network), said that healthcare in Ireland needs to be more LGBT inclusive.

He cited the 'Supporting LGBT Lives' study, conducted by the National Office for Suicide Prevention (NOSP), which captures the wider experiences of LGBT people in the areas of school, work and healthcare.

Some key findings of the 2009 study, which involved more than 1,100 participants included:

- 27% had self-harmed
- 18% had attempted suicide – 85% of these attempts were related to the experience of being an LGBT person
- 25% were physically attacked because they were LGBT
- 77% felt that healthcare providers need to have more knowledge and sensitivity to LGBT issues
- Only 40% felt respected as an LGBT person by healthcare providers
- 45% actively sought out gay-friendly LGBT healthcare providers because of previous bad experiences.

#### **European perspective**

At the INMO event, Marian Harkin, MEP, provided 'The European Perspective' on LGBT issues. "Equal enjoyment of human rights in all EU-member States is a core value for the union," she said. However, Ms Harkin highlighted the fact that there is so much more to achieve in Europe when it comes to equality for LGBT people.

She cited a recent study carried out by the European Agency for Fundamental Rights, which involved a survey of 93,000 LGBT people on their perceptions and experiences. "Almost half of the respondents said that they had felt personally discriminated against or harassed on the grounds of sexual orientation in the year preceding the survey," she said.

"A quarter had been attacked or threatened with violence in the previous five years, and this figure rises to 35 percent

for transgender persons.

According to Ms Harkin, this discrimination and violence is rarely reported as the people involved believe that nothing will change and no action will be taken.

"Countries that have adopted LGBT action plans, or integrated these issues into human rights action plans had better outcomes than in other countries," she said. "In countries where there is a homophobic agenda or a political agenda, either up front or latent, these countries had much higher incidents of hate crime and harassment."

Ms Harkin stressed that politicians can and must help to shape better outcomes for LGBT equality, and that policy makers can work to put action plans in place and to subsequently monitor their effectiveness.

#### **The way forward**

"While recognising that public opinion has shifted in favour of LGBT rights, we certainly cannot stand back and assume such rights will flow without elements of prejudice, discrimination, bullying and invisibility, driven by a fear of 'coming out,'" said Liam Doran.

"Gay rights are human rights and it is important that LGBT members of the INMO know that they are fully supported and any attempt to discriminate against any of our members will be opposed by the Organisation."

"Our language must change to accommodate everyone and let our colleagues share their personal stories in their own time and without fear. Visible support from trade unions is an important step.

He concluded: "The INMO, and indeed other unions, must step up to the plate and we must lead by example. We must show that our presumption of heterosexuality serves only to isolate and marginalise our colleagues."

Any member who wishes to join the INMO's LGBT nurses and midwives network should contact Clare Treacy at [clare@inmo.ie](mailto:clare@inmo.ie) or telephone on 01 664 0630

Videos of the conference presentations are available at [www.inmo.ie](http://www.inmo.ie)