

Harry Gijbels, Citation

Harry Gijbels is a Senior Lecturer in Nursing at University College Cork (UCC) in the Republic of Ireland. His colleagues nominated him for the Human Rights and Nursing Award on the basis of his many innovative initiatives for people using and working in mental health services. He has a string of qualifications, has presented papers, exhibited posters at dozens of conferences and delivered workshops in various countries, published in the nursing and national press, and with his colleague Lydia Sapouna, a Lecturer in Social Work, has received the University College Cork Exceptional Citizen Award for his work in mental health and his contribution to the establishment of the Critical Voices Network Ireland (CVNI).

Research has demonstrated that promoting the traditional medical model has served to worsen discrimination and the denial of human rights, especially in mental health. In recent years, an international 'recovery approach' has been developed by service users and their allies. Harry has been at the forefront in promoting the citizenship of service users as a central theme in Ireland and internationally and has become a leader in this field.

The recovery approach requires close collaboration between academics, services users, carers and mental health professionals. It involves the creation of an environment where different voices are heard and respected. One of Harry's greatest achievements as an academic has been his nurturing of just such an environment in UCC itself. To achieve this, Harry has shown the ability to work with different and sometimes conflicting perspectives and agendas, and has done so with patience, tolerance, humour and warmth.

Most notably, since 2009 Harry and Lydia have organised an Annual Critical Perspectives Conference. This two-day conference provides a platform for new thinking, new ideas and new approaches in mental health. These conferences are unique in that they are free for all participants and attract service users, professionals, academics, and carers.

An offshoot of the second such conference was the Critical Voices Network Ireland (CVNI). This is a network and coalition of individuals and national campaigning and advocacy groups, interested in considering and developing responses to human distress that are creative, enabling, respectful and firmly grounded in human rights. The critical perspectives' conference is now considered one of the most significant events of its kind nationally and internationally to debate and promote alternative perspectives in mental health thinking and practice.

Harry has also been central in setting up the Hearing Voices Network Ireland (HVNI). He vigorously and tenaciously sought funding for the development of this network in Ireland, which has led to the training of 250 mental health nurses across

Ireland and to the development of around 15-20 new Hearing Voices Support Groups. The HVNI supports people who hear voices, see visions, experience sensory or tactile sensations and have unusual beliefs, thus reframing traditional biomedical understandings of such experiences.

Harry also works and lobbies on human rights and legal issues, such as forced 'treatment', capacity legislation, advance directives and campaigns on disability and mental health research.

He has also been involved with the development of the Sli Eile project in North Cork. This is a highly successful residential farm that works with a recovery philosophy.

For many years, Harry has been passionate in ensuring that undergraduate and postgraduate nursing students engage with issues around dominant discourses, power and expertise within mental health, and consequently, he has ensured that 'experts by experience' are meaningfully involved in course delivery matters, including lecturing, so that the human rights of service users are firmly at the heart of nurses' practice. Raising such issues can be uncomfortable, but Harry engages with difficult subjects with kindness, humour and humanity, which enables people to feel contained and supported to engage with and work through difficult material.

Harry undertakes this work voluntarily, in addition to his full time job as a Senior Lecturer, and demonstrates outstanding leadership within nursing, raising the bar in terms of critical thinking for nurses, strengthening their identity as practitioners and successfully demonstrating how academic institutions can play a crucial role in supporting, enabling and empowering people who traditionally have often been silenced and marginalised.

Harry is a shining example to nurses internationally in being willing to take a stand to ensure that the human rights of patients are paramount, in his tremendous dedication to the teaching of humane nursing practice, and for his exceptional leadership within nursing.