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***Harvey Gordon** Consultant Forensic Psychiatrist, Bethlem Royal Hospital Denis Hill Unit, Monk's Orchard Road, Beckenham, Kent BR3 3BX, and Honorary Lecturer in Forensic Psychiatry, Institute of Psychiatry, London,
Clive Meux Consultant Forensic Psychiatrist, Oxford Clinic, Oxford

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JUSTIN BROPHY

The Spike Milligan Public Speaking Competition

The Spike Milligan Public Speaking Competition is a series of events conducted by the Irish Division of The Royal College of Psychiatrists' Public Education Committee. The initiative began as a local project, as part of the Changing Minds campaign. It is aimed at developing lifelong positive attitudes towards mental illness by doctors in training, and at redressing some of the stigma and negativity towards mental illness prevalent among trained doctors. It also aims to provide them with a positive experience of public speaking, in particular on mental health topics, and to enhance skills in communication with the public.

I originally proposed the idea when looking at possible responses to the Changing Minds campaign. I had adjudicated in a public speaking competition held between second level schools, sponsored by the Mental Health Association of Ireland. This is a remarkably successful competition, and has been acknowledged by the World Health Organization as an international model for informing and changing negative opinions on mental health. A public speaking rather than debate format was adopted, in order to avoid the polarisation on mental health topics. This model is seen as a key to the project's success. Topics selected by local organisers are sent in advance to each team, who then prepare a public speaking presentation for delivery against the rival team. The competition has become the principal public speaking event in Irish schools. Hoping to build on this, I proposed that a similar competition could be run between Irish medical schools.

The committee quickly took up the idea and received endorsement centrally from the College. Pfizer Ireland supported the project from its inception with an unrestricted educational grant, including generous prize money of €1500 each for the members of the winning team. Ian McKeever of Pfizer suggested the competition should be named after a well-known person. Spike Milligan stood out as being the most appropriate. He was chosen as an obvious, appealing figurehead who did enormous work in the de-stigmatisation of mental illness, who had a wonderful record of public speaking on various issues in his own life and who could capture the imagination and inspiration of a young audience. We wrote to his agent, asking if he would lend his support to the competition. Although he was in declining health at this time, we received the green light to go ahead, hence the 'Spike Milligan Public Speaking Competition'.

It was decided to have three heats between the six medical schools at regional venues. A team of two speaks for seven minutes each on a pre-agreed topic, without the use of audio-visual aids, and is judged as a unit. Medical school classes were briefed by an organiser to generate

interest. The full backing of the medical schools was received and the students quickly became enthusiastic. A special sculpture was commissioned from Dick Joint, whose sensibility was thought perfect to capture the spirit of the competition. He produced a piece capturing the experience of mood change over the course of life, carved from a substantial piece of black Kilkenny Limestone.

Utilising PR contacts, a team of three adjudicators was assembled, composed of a psychiatrist, a media figure and a high-profile 'personality' with a credible interest in mental health issues. The regional heats were a great success, with a very high standard of entry. A boisterous intervarsity atmosphere added greatly to the enjoyment of the occasion. University College Galway, Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland and Queen's University Belfast emerged victorious over University College Dublin, University College Cork and Trinity College Dublin, respectively. The final was arranged in Dublin at a time when students were not heavily burdened by exams. A wide array of guests was invited, including representatives of the use and professional groups across all disciplines with interests in Irish mental health. Queen's University Belfast emerged victorious after a daring presentation. The overall standard was notable for its quality, passion and the amount of work put in by the teams. Spike Milligan's death, shortly prior to the event, brought particular poignancy to the final night.

The feedback from the students indicated that they had learned a lot about mental health issues, and many indicated that their attitudes had been positively shaped by the experience. The competition may also help promote recruitment into the speciality. The competition is in its second year here, and we hope that the idea will be taken up throughout the British Isles, similar to the Observer Mace, perhaps eventually toward a four-nation final event.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank many people who helped in the running of the competition, but particularly the family and estate of the late Spike Milligan, who transformed the prestige of the event. Thanks also to Dr Kate Ganter, Chairperson of the Irish Division Public Education Committee, Dr Jim Anderson, this year's organiser, and also Miriam Silke of the Irish Division, Ian McKeever and Paul Reid, and the many adjudicators and local organisers who gave of their time to ensure that the competition was not only a success but also continues to thrive.

Justin Brophy Consultant Psychiatrist, Newcastle Hospital, Greystones, Co. Wicklow, Ireland