

Speech by Liz O'Donnell T.D. at launch of Empower Drug Awareness Campaign

29th June 2006

Pearse Street Library, Dublin.

Thank you, Jim. Good morning everybody.

I'd like to start by thanking the *Empower* team for the invitation to be a part of this important campaign. It is good to see government agencies such as the HSE working with community organisations like Tipperary Regional Youth Services on projects such as this.

I would also like to commend Jim Joyce and his team at Schering-Plough Pharmaceuticals (Ireland). I understand this project would not have been possible without their support.

I do not believe it is overstating the case to say that substance misuse presents a most serious threat to our teenagers. The array of illicit drugs available to them is awesome, and misuse by young people of legal substances such as alcohol and cigarettes is a serious problem.

As the DVD suggests, this misuse is usually masking serious emotional problems which need addressing.

All of us would like to think our youngsters have the confidence to avoid abusing drugs and alcohol to cope with the complexities and pain of growing up.

But the fact is many Irish youngsters do not have the resources to cope - and mistakenly turn to drugs and alcohol. The Government can and is tackling the criminal gangs on the supply side but, like it or not, the demand is real and drugs and alcohol are very much part of our youth landscape.

In 2003, a study ^[1] of Irish 15 - and 16 - year-old school children found that:

- 88% had consumed alcohol in the past year;
- 72% had been drunk in the past year;
- 33% had smoked cigarettes in the past month;
- 39% had used cannabis;
- 18% had used inhalants; and
- 5% had used ecstasy.

The Government's *National Drugs Strategy 2001-2008* ^[2] aims to:

- reduce the availability of illicit drugs;
- enable access to treatment and other supports;
- reduce the risk behaviour and the harm associated with drug misuse;
- collect comparable data;
- strengthen partnerships with communities;
- promote a greater awareness, and clarity about drug misuse in society.

Which, is where this *Empower* campaign comes in.

From next week, every local library in Ireland will have two copies of the *Empower* DVD available for free loan by the public.

More than 1000 health centres, doctors' surgeries, youth organisations and community groups around the country will display posters informing people about the campaign.

Separately, the HSE is funding the distribution of 2000 copies of the *Empower* DVD to secondary school students.

Empower is a resource that is designed to be used and reused by the community. The title is well chosen. It is about providing parents with knowledge about drug misuse.

It is not realistic to completely shield our children from exposure to drugs. But we can educate our children to understand the dangers.

It is great to see so many young people here today supporting this campaign.

As parents, we are still *the* key influencers of our children's behaviour. But, what we think we know about drugs can often be wide of the mark.

Before discussing the dangers of drugs with youngster's parents need to educate themselves. That is where this DVD is so effective.

Empower provides clear, simple information about what drugs are out there, what they are called, and advice on the behavioural changes to watch out for.

Ultimately, the DVD is an education tool - for parents and their children. How individual families address these issues will, of course, vary. What is vital, however, is that the "drug-awareness" conversation happens in some form within the home.

I have no doubt that this DVD will be the catalyst for that conversation taking place in many households across Ireland.

Thank you again for inviting me to launch *Empower*. I wish the project well and all who are associated with it.

[1] European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs

<http://www.espad.org/diagrambilder/summary.pdf>

[2] National Drugs Strategy 2001-2008

<http://www.pobail.ie/en/NationalDrugsStrategy/NationalDrugsStrategyOverview/file,2229,en.pdf>