

Evening Echo

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We have to stop obesity trend

WE'RE all going to have to stay back from the table.

And when we're at the table, the food we consume will have to be a lot healthier than some of what we're eating at the moment.

And we're going to have to get up and do a lot more physical activity.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) figures released yesterday suggest Europe is heading for an unprecedented explosion in rates of obesity and excess weight, with Ireland the worst-affected.

In 2030, the proportion of obese and overweight men in Ireland is projected to rise to 89% with a corresponding 85% of women falling into this category.

The forecast puts Irish men at the top of an "overweight" table of 53 countries, matched only by Uzbekistan.

For women in Ireland, obesity rates are soaring from 23% to 57%.

The proportion of obese Irish men was expected to increase from 26% to 48% while the figure for those either overweight or obese rising from 74% to 89%.

The gravity of these findings can be gauged by the fact that they were described by a health expert yesterday as "extremely scary", and "unthinkable" in terms of physical and mental healthcare.

Prof O'Shea, Head of Weight Management Service in St Columcille's and St Vincent's hospitals, told RTE he believed Ireland was leading the trend because we have a particular problem with physical activity levels, especially among young women.

He said there has been a levelling off of childhood obesity rates overall, because of falling levels in better-off, better-educated socioeconomic groups.

However, he said in less well educated, less well-off groups, the upward trend is dramatic.

He said 12% of three-year-olds in lower socioeconomic groups are obese compared to 4% in better-off, better-educated groups.

The professor's comments must give us all pause for thought.

A horrible scenario is emerging for our health services, our government and for families and individuals.

We all know that heart problems, cancer and diabetes follow obesity. We have to get a handle on this situation and turn it round - fast.

Press Council of Ireland



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Dr Laurence Davis, who lectures in Government at University College Cork, feels that the proposals for marriage equality which we will vote on are modest – but he will still vote Yes.



CAMPAIGNERS against marriage equality in Ireland have painted an apocalyptic picture of the nation in the aftermath of a Yes vote in the May 22 referendum. Passage of the referendum, we are informed, will result in the collapse of marriage and the family, the end of motherhood and fatherhood, unspeakable harm to children, and draconian restrictions on freedom of religion and conscience.

Yet if this is so, then why has life gone on very much as before in the 21 countries that have adopted same-sex marriage since 2001?

The key to unravelling this mystery, I suggest, lies in the relatively modest nature of marriage equality proposals. Far from undermining marriage, opening it up to same-sex couples keen to create a loving household and a social and economic partnership only strengthens the institution.

This, in turn, poses a dilemma to those such as me who fully support marriage equality, but who have serious concerns about the exclusionary nature of the institution of marriage itself. For whatever else it may be, marriage is a State-sanctioned and regulated institution that elevates some household forms and intimate relationships over others.

The point is frequently forgotten by many advocates for same-sex marriage, who claim that marriage is nothing more or less than a public expression of love. Absent from this idealised picture is any consideration of the ever growing role of the nation-state in the regulation of our most intimate relationships, its market-driven tendency to shift the costs of care from society as a whole to private households, and its legal discrimination against those who by necessity or choice remain unmarried.

Far from challenging any of these destructive historical trends, same-sex marriage may actually reinforce them by perpetuating the idea that legal rights and benefits ought to be linked to marriage, and by strengthening a norm of coupledom that marginalises those who live otherwise.

For all of these reasons and more, I am persuaded that the fight for marriage equality must not be regarded as an end in itself, but only the beginning of a much longer struggle for a far more deeply equal and loving world – one in which basic rights are not tied to marriage, and there are many different socially recognised and supported ways to organise one's intimate life.

In the meantime, however, I will continue to speak out with all the intellect and passion I can muster on behalf of a Yes vote. I will do so because I believe it is possible to find a balance between fighting for equal rights now and maintaining a vision of a transformed world in which those rights might be irrelevant.

Critics of marriage equality contend that existing civil partnerships are sufficient, and that they are in no way demeaning or discriminatory. However, there are at least two major problems with this argument. First, civil partnerships do not have constitutional recognition or protection, as marriage does. Second and more importantly, precisely because the civil partnership scheme was intentionally devised to distinguish gay people from heterosexuals, it has the effect of maintaining and reinforcing a stigma of exclusion that the Constitution prohibits.

This point was brought home to me by an event I recently attended organised by a national coalition of children's and youth or-

Marriage equality fight must be just the start



Dr Laurence Davis: Same-sex marriages will only strengthen institution of marriage.

rganisations supporting a Yes vote.

One of the speakers cited the very disturbing findings of a 2009 study conducted by the Children's Research Centre at Trinity College Dublin which found that 58 per cent of LGBT young people suffered homophobic bullying in their schools. The research also found that 50 per cent of LGBT people under age 25 had thought about ending their lives, and a shocking 20 per cent had attempted to do so.

Speakers warned that a No vote would signal to young LGBT people that their experiences of homophobic bullying and rejection are acceptable in Ireland. By contrast, a Yes vote would send a clear message to all children that they are valued, and that treating them differently because of their sexuality or the sexual orientation of somebody in their household is unacceptable.

The two presentations that moved me the

most were those by young people who spoke about what a Yes vote would mean to them personally. As I listened to them speak, I found myself welling up with an unexpected sense of pride and hope tinged by sadness.

The sadness was occasioned by a moment of personal reflection on the terrible human cost of discriminatory laws and social prejudice. The pride and hope stemmed from a recognition that a new generation of LGBT people would fight for their rights, and refuse to settle for anything less than full equality.

'No' campaigners are fond of repeating the slogan 'Mothers and Fathers Matter'. Of course they do. All mothers and fathers matter, as do all children and all human beings, whatever their sexual orientation.

That is why I will vote Yes on May 22, and why regardless of the outcome of the referendum I will continue to do everything I can to make social equality a living reality.

■ Dr Laurence Davis lectures in Government at University College Cork and is chair of UCC's LGBT Staff Network.