

## Doing their best with a flawed system

Finally, we're to get a review of the mental health system. Not before time, if the news of deterioration is right; we're led to believe nothing much at all functions in that branch of health care.

Something does, of course. There are good people working in mental health. They do an extraordinary job, in spite of the obstacles. How do I know? From listening to the following story told by a friend. The first thing you have to grasp is that it's not my friend who's suffered mental illness, although he reckons his 18-month journey got him heading in that direction.

The mentally ill person was his sister-in-law. Well, *is* his sister-in-law. She's still in his life, still a mental health patient, still without hope of a cure, although that's not the right word when you've been as sick as she has for the best part of 40 years.

The fairest way to put it is "stable". More or less. She is visited twice daily each morning and night by health workers who unlock a small cabinet in her home and take out medication and watch her down it. She can't be relied on to take it regularly by herself. Without it, her life would be even more difficult.

Sometimes - uncannily close to when the moon is full and those of us without proper medical knowledge might speculate that the big bright orb in the sky exerts destabilising pressure on our brains (a fairy tale, according to expert opinion) – she needs something extra powerful, something to calm the bouts of delusion, loud singing, angry rants.

It's medication that can have stronger side effects than those she takes regularly, so she had to ask for it. Despite her being legally certified as mentally incompetent long ago, that decision was apparently still within her grasp when she felt particularly discombobulated. It was an approach that seemed to work, although that medication has now been changed for something else.

Her life is spent sleeping, doing washing that probably doesn't need to be done, planning for the birth of babies fathered by famous people, walking up to the dairy for groceries and cigarettes, and smoking. Yes, that's one definite failure of the system: despite its best intentions and strategies, she gets through something approaching \$10,000-worth of fags a year.

All the while in this tortured life, her head rings with the sound of voices coming out of the TV and the radio that bear little relation to the on-air discourse heard by most of the rest of us. Someone is in her head every day and night.

My friend's involvement in all this began when he and his wife embarked on an accommodation arrangement that would see this close but irrevocably distant relative live in part of their house. She has not to his knowledge shown inclinations towards violent physical behaviour – although she can tongue-lash with the best of them – so he assumed it would be a perfectly straight-forward endeavour. He would be able, surely, to reason with the woman if her behaviour encroached too much on their lives.

The first thing to become obvious was that debating with someone in such a state of more or less constant perturbation is impossible. Conversation sometimes begins in a "normal" way, but always deteriorates into nonsense.

After moving in, she left her lights on all night, banged doors and cupboards, smoked indoors, talked loudly to herself and imagined others, ran her washing machine all hours of the night, abused my friend on some occasions when they saw one another, gushed incoherently over him on others.

Anxieties mounted. For possibly the first time in his life, my friend grasped that he'd somehow lost control over it. He went to counselling, which helped a bit. He insisted on meetings with mental health officials, who were sympathetic but seemed powerless to do what came to resemble the impossible – restore normality.

Then, something unexpected happened. Slowly, the trio – encouraged and supported by health workers in possession of oceans of understanding and patience – began to settle into a bearable routine. There were lapses, but time dulled them, put them in perspective.

Now, a year and a half down what has been a tortuous track, there is something approaching equilibrium. If you ask my friend if like everyone else he thinks our mental health system is stuffed, he'll give you a smile: "Not in my experience," he'll say.