

As Christmas approaches

Owen Hughes sees opportunities for psychologists to become more involved in public affairs in Wales

By the time you read this column you will probably be getting the tinsel out, but as I write, the headline on today's *Western Mail* is 'First Minister hails "momentous" day as details of proposed opt-out organ donation policy unveiled'. The proposal is that should an adult from Wales die in Wales then it will be presumed that they have given consent for their organs to be donated.

It is somewhat unclear at this point as to whether anyone will be consulted to check whether this is likely to be true, or what would happen if the family of the deceased objected strongly.

Online the blogs, wikis and discussion boards are alive with debate on the ethics, morals and practicalities of the proposal. I'm not intending to argue for the rights and wrongs of either side of the argument, but I'd like to ask why psychologists are so quiet in the debate when they have so much to contribute. As a profession, psychologists place great emphasis on the ethics of what they do and are taught to think through these sorts of conundrums as part of their training. That is even before we consider the profession-specific knowledge regarding the impact of the organ donation process on both the donor's family, the recipient and society at large.

Wales isn't the first country to enact legislation on presumed consent. Belgium, for instance, has had similar legislation for several years now, and indeed the number of transplants has risen as a result. What is not known is the impact of the changed relationship between doctor and patient. The requirement for informed consent, at least

in theory, puts the patient in the driving seat, but what is the impact when the health professional starts to presume they know best?

Is legislation a heavy-handed approach to changing people's behaviour for society's good? Our prisons are full, despite an ever-growing list of misdemeanors of which the general



Dear Santa, please could I have recognition from the Welsh Government that psychologists have a lot to offer?

public can fall foul. The Welsh Government (note, they are no longer an assembly) has had law-making powers in certain areas of legislation since a vote in May of this year. This has allowed them to show their independence of mind, and to some it would seem that they like nothing more than to tackle a topic where they can be seen to be first to deal with it, and if England does it differently then so much the better. The problem is that Wales is still fairly new to self-government and hasn't the same track record of trying (and failing) as

Westminster. This leads them to rely on law and economics for deciding on policy rather than considering the role that 'newer' sciences such as psychology have to play in government. For instance, Wales has no equivalent to the Cabinet Office's Behavioural Insight Team that supports the government in Westminster. Maybe resorting to legislation rather than policy is the symptom of a less mature government.

Psychologists as a breed are not great self-publicists. There are exceptions to this of course, but I am not aware of any practising psychologists who have undergone a career change and become professional politicians. I'd be glad to know if I'm wrong. Given that so many of the problems that face society have a psychological element, maybe we have a duty as a profession and a society to

do more. We have a growing voice in Westminster, but as the importance of devolved governments increases perhaps we should be investing more resources in those regions too.

The Cabinet Office's Behavioural Insight Team is apparently known colloquially as 'the nudge unit' in reference to the nudge theory that is slowly becoming a part of more subtle governmental policies. One of the Team's recent reports however highlights the lack of investment in this approach, for instance when combating alcohol abuse. The Westminster

government invests £8 million to promote healthy drinking levels. The drinks industry invests £800 million to promote their wares.

Being a bit of a woolly liberal at heart my views on any particular topic might change from day to day, if not hour to hour, depending on the arguments that have been presented to me and the experience of my daily life. The chances of the decision being the best one for the situation, however, relies on being open to the diverse range of opinions. So as I start to think about all things Christmas, I might just add one more thing to my wish list for Santa – a recognition from the Welsh Government that psychologists have a lot to offer and might even make their lives a bit easier. You may think Santa is a fantasy, but I hope my wish might not be.

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