

# Jake O'Kane



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SO how are those New Year resolutions coming along?

By now, the vast majority will have once again accepted defeat and taken back to the bottle or chocolate. Some of you are even more damned, in that you will have taken out a gym membership you'll never use.

I once calculated how much a gym membership had cost me versus the number of times I actually used the gym — I think it worked out at £50 per session as I'd only gone twice that year.

My problem is probably similar to your own — an irrational belief in dramatic change, the idea that we can lose ten stone in a couple of months or put six inches on our biceps just by

taking out membership of a gym. The reality, of course, is that real change is slow and incremental. It's the small changes we make in our daily lives that really make a difference, not the bit dramatic ones.

I've long since given up on gyms. I have a broken back so all I'd do is exacerbate that injury. Instead I walk. Even at that I'm not great, but I've stuck to it for a number of years now and there has been progress. Progress so slow it at times felt glacial, but progress no less.

And on the subject of gym membership, why is it that gyms make it so easy to join but so complicated to leave? At this time of year, gym owners sit in

their mansions, rubbing their hands in glee, knowing millions of customers will be setting up direct debits for membership which will never be used.

I know from close friends the hoops some gyms make you jump through before allowing you to exit your contract. You can't just phone up and cancel — oh no, there's a 30-day cooling-off period from when you first inform them until when they allow you to leave.

OK, there's a new batch of budget gyms that allow monthly contracts, but still not enough.

Surely it's time for an independently set code on gym memberships so members only lose pounds in weight.



WELL done — you've managed to live another year!

Some of the younger among you will wonder at that statement, but if you've passed the half-century mark as I have, another year above ground is to be seen as an achievement, especially as our health service is slowly ground into oblivion.

The announcement over Christmas by health chiefs that people should only attend casualty units if they're on the point of death indicates just how bad things are. Reasons for the decline are numerous — lack of investment from central Government,

draconian wage restraints on nursing pushing many out of the profession — but one factor that isn't often recognised is the upsurge in health service litigation and the numerous ambulance-chasing legal services now widely advertised.

Our doctors now operate under the constant threat of being sued.

This means GPs need expensive insurance cover which rises dramatically for those operating an out-of-hours service. As more GPs opt out of house calls because of insurance cover, more patients are forced to attend casualty and the vicious circle is complete.



## BRYSON MAKES MY DAY

I HAD already filed this column when someone on my Twitter feed alerted me to the fact that Ruth Patterson had chosen none other than Jamie Bryson as campaign manager in her upcoming fight with DUP Assembly appointee Emma Pengelly.

All I can say is: "Thank you Lord for the many gifts you bestow on me your unworthy servant!"

This will now be a battle royal between Sadolin-coated Ruth and the new girl Emma — I know who my money is on.

And with wee Jamie in the background... I'm so excited I might try and talk the wife into relocating to East Belfast.

## Bowie brought the c-c-changes

WHEN an icon such as David Bowie dies, everyone seems to become a fan overnight. I have to admit I wasn't — Bowie was simply too outlandish for a wee boy from North Belfast growing up in the 70s.

As I grew older and my taste in music widened, I began to appreciate his influence, not just on music but also culture. Everyone from T-Rex to Boy George borrowed from the Bowie stylebook and the New Romantics would never have existed but for him.

Possibly the greatest lesson to be learned from Bowie's life was his refusal to settle with his latest success — he was a musical auteur so individual that he not only created original music, but changed forever the music industry.

His myriad of alter-egos were not just adventures in clothing or make-up but a genuine attempt to shift into a completely new entity.

In a society as conservative as ours — where you can be heckled for wearing a pork pie hat — it would be good if we all occasionally tried something new.

One thing is for sure — since Bowie's arrival at the pearly gates, St Peter will be sporting much more colourful clothing and a braided beard.



## THE recapture of Mexican drug baron 'El Chapo' Guzman is to be welcomed, but it will have no effect on the international drug trade.

As one kingpin is rearrested — strangely after the involvement of actor Sean Penn — another ten will be waiting to fill his shoes and their bank balances.

The Mexican government along with

some central and south American states have long accepted this reality.

They rightly point the finger of blame at the consumers of illegal drugs around the world who fuel the illicit trade.

But what consumer-countries are doing to address their endemic drug problem gives producing-countries little hope of any change.

*An example of this lack of vision can be seen half a world away from Mexico here in Northern Ireland where drug addiction is an ever-growing problem.*

A recovering heroin addict from Ballymena recently lost his legal battle to stop cutbacks in addiction services.

Charles Boyle argued that as a recovering addict directly affected by any cuts, he should have been consulted before any final decision was taken.

The High Court decided no such right existed — once again demonstrating the stupidity of decision-making around addiction treatment.

Most research into the efficacy of drug treatment indicates that every penny spent by the State is recouped many times over in savings in policing, the courts and health costs incurred by untreated addicts.

Until the paradigm under which we view addiction shifts from one of criminality to one of illness, there is no chance we will ever gain traction against this modern day plague.

Many of you reading this will bristle at the very thought of addiction being described as an illness.

For you, addicts are weak-willed individuals who have brought their problems upon themselves.

When you read the word "addict", you probably have a mental image of a young person lying in a derelict house, with a needle in their arm — that image may soon have to change.

A recent survey here showed half of our population is on some form of prescribed medication — today's addict is as likely to be the granny hooked on tranquilisers or the working father addicted to over-the-counter painkillers.

This hidden epidemic has already become evident in the US and will surely soon appear here.

Many of us may soon be looking for treatment for a loved family member only to find our prejudices around addiction have led to no treatment being available.



## EXPENSE INQUIRY ARRIVES

WAY back last September, I happened to mention that the DUP's Jim Shannon and Ian Paisley Jnr had topped Westminster MP expenses rankings.

At the time I found it baffling that MPs with some of the larger constituencies further away from Westminster had much lower expense bills, but I said I was sure both could stand over their claims.

It looks like Mr Shannon, above, is going to get the opportunity to do just that as Westminster's Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority is looking into his expenses claim of £205,798.

He has indicated there may have been a mistake with the amount some of his staff put in for travelling expenses, but assures us that

"everything is Kosher" and his staff work extremely hard as does he.

I'd like to think they all work hard when claiming that sort of cash.

