

Policy Objective : To provide an adequate healthcare service that enables people to attain a state of physical, mental and social wellbeing, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

The present situation

Healthcare is a social right that every person should enjoy. It is also an important factor in economic success. People should be assured of the required treatment and care in times of illness or vulnerability, but this is currently not the case in Ireland.

A two-tier system exists where private patients have quicker access to both diagnostics and treatment than do public patients. The World Health Organisation has noted that Ireland is the only country in the EU that does not offer free universal access to primary care; a majority of the population must pay up to €60 for each GP visit, and up to €144 per month for prescription drugs.

The extension of medical cards to those under 6 and those over 70 has been a very positive move in the right direction. However since the onset of the recession, many other people have lost their discretionary medical cards, which is often a source of great distress

Overall, Ireland's public healthcare system ranks poorly compared to other EU countries, due to a combination of insufficient capital investment over a prolonged period being compounded by recent cuts to current expenditure.

Issues

Hospital Waiting Times

In 2006, the Minister for Health declared it a "national emergency" when the number of patients on trolleys in Irish hospitals reached 495. This number has been consistently exceeded since, in what is a clearly unacceptable state of affairs.

Behind these numbers is unnecessary human suffering as many patients, often older ones, are left waiting on hospital trolleys or chairs for hours or even days before being admitted.

The link between poverty and ill-health is well documented, with the inequalities in Ireland's health system leading to significant differences in life-expectancy between poor and affluent areas.

Also, many people experience severe problems accessing support in the community. The average wait for a residential bed in a nursing home is 15 weeks. Patients also experience long waits for elective surgery; the numbers waiting more than eight months have trebled. Meanwhile, targets being set to deal with these crises are extremely unambitious.

Reductions in Investment

The root cause of these issues will come as no surprise; capital expenditure in the sector was 42% lower in 2013 than in 2008. Our stock of public residential long-stay and short stay beds has been cut by roughly a third. Funding for health services for the disabled has been severely reduced. Cuts in spending tend to disproportionately affect people on low incomes, as they are less likely to be able to afford private treatment.

According to the OECD, Greece and Ireland have experienced the sharpest declines in per capita healthcare spending by government. Ireland's fell by 7.7% in 2010 and by a further 3% in 2011. Such cuts have exacerbated an already critical situation.

Obesity and Chronic Illness

Ireland's obesity problem has lately been well documented in the media. Projections of obesity

costs in Ireland indicate that if present trends continue and no policy interventions are made, the cost of obesity will rise to over €4.3 billion in 2020 and to €5.4 billion in 2030. This is unsustainable when allied to demographic changes that will result in higher costs elsewhere in the system. A Sugar Sweetened Drinks Tax would raise revenue, whilst curbing sugar intake among the population and acting as a step in the right direction of healthcare policy encouraging healthier lifestyles.

What policies are required in the years up ahead?

The most dramatic anticipated change in the future structure of the Irish population is the increase in the number of older people. One clear implication of this will be additional demand for healthcare services and facilities. In the context of our past mistakes, it is important that Ireland begins to plan for this additional demand; training staff and constructing the necessary facilities. Accompanying our ageing population will be a higher number of people with disabilities, and more people accessing health services.

Health spending tends to be higher in countries with older populations. Ireland has a relatively young one at the moment, and yet we are struggling to deal with the current situation. We need to increase healthcare spending not just for demographic reasons, but also to catch up with other European countries in terms of facilities and standards of service provision. This will mean the necessary restoration of services previously cut, and an improvement in the standard being delivered. These plan should also facilitate a greater shift towards primary and community care, in order to ease the burden on acute hospitals.

10 things Government can do

1. *Increase the availability and quality of Primary Care and Social Care services.*
2. *Restore medical card-coverage for all people who are vulnerable. Treat the granting of a medical card as a civic right, not a privilege*
3. *Act effectively to end the current hospital waiting list crisis.*
4. *Create a statutory entitlement to a Home Care Package. This will require increased funding but may save the State money long-term, as HCPs allow people to remain living in their own homes, rather than entering residential nursing care.*
5. *Create additional respite care and long stay care facilities for older people and people with disabilities, and provide capital investment to build additional community nursing facilities.*
6. *Increase educational campaigns promoting health, targeting particularly people who are economically disadvantaged, acknowledging that a preventative approach saves money in the long-run.*
7. *Properly resource and develop mental health services, and facilitate campaigns giving greater attention to the issue of suicide.*
8. *Institute long-term planning and investment in the sector, acknowledging the impending demographic changes in Ireland, to ensure that we can cope with these changes.*
9. *Adopt a target to reduce the body mass index (BMI) of the population by 5% by 2021 and introduce a Sugar Sweetened Drinks tax to make progress towards this target.*
10. *Continue the trend started by the current government by moving towards full universal healthcare for all.*