



DE GRUYTER  
OPEN

*Administration*, vol. 66, no. 1 (2018), pp. 25–30  
doi: 10.2478/admin-2018-0004

## Health services, 2017

**Joanna O’Riordan**

*Institute of Public Administration, Ireland*

### Overcrowding and waiting lists

The year began like the start of 2016, with concern over the number of people on trolleys in the accident and emergency departments of Ireland’s hospitals. In early January the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO) reported a record-breaking figure of 612 patients who had been admitted to hospitals and were awaiting beds. By the end of the year the INMO had reported that throughout 2017 a total of 98,981 admitted patients had been recorded as waiting for a bed across the country’s 29 hospitals.

Waiting lists for inpatient and day-case procedures also came to public attention during 2017 following an *RTÉ Investigates* documentary, ‘Living on the List’. In response, Minister Simon Harris, TD, referred to the Health Service Executive’s (HSE) action plan on waiting lists, which had been put in place in mid 2016 to halve the number of patients waiting more than eighteen months for treatment, and to the progress being made as a result. Children with scoliosis requiring back surgery featured prominently in the RTÉ documentary. In May Minister Harris welcomed the publication of the HSE’s *Scoliosis Waiting List Action Plan*.

In October a report by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) identified the further challenges facing the health services as a result of demographic changes and the growing population of the country. According to the ESRI, over the next twelve years to 2030, demand for acute hospital services will increase by 33 per cent, while

demand for older-person services will increase by 54 per cent. In response, the INMO called for major expansion of all areas of the healthcare system.

## **Industrial relations**

At the start of the year there was a threat of industrial action by the INMO over understaffing and pressurised working conditions. This threat was withdrawn in April, following a ballot whereby members agreed to accept proposals to begin addressing the staffing, recruitment and retention crisis in nursing and midwifery. The proposals, which emerged following talks chaired by the Workplace Relations Commission, included:

- recruitment of 1,200 nurses and midwives before the end of the year;
- a funded workforce plan, to be subject to quarterly reviews under ministerial order;
- offering of permanent posts to all nurses and midwives currently on panels and all 2016/17 graduates;
- increased incentives to attract nurses back from overseas;
- more flexible permanent contracts;
- restoration of allowances for nurses working in certain services.

However, challenges in respect of staffing continued throughout the year, with lengthy delays reported in filling vacant posts and the ongoing departure of Irish educated nurses and midwives to other countries. These difficulties were confirmed in a report by the Public Service Pay Commission, published in May, which noted particular difficulties in the health services with regard to recruitment and retention.

In September it was announced that the INMO membership had voted in favour of the Public Service Stability (Lansdowne Road) Agreement, now set to run till 2020. Following on from the agreement in April, the INMO executive had recommended acceptance.

## **Maternity matters**

In March it was announced that planning permission had been submitted in respect of the development of the new National Maternity Hospital on the St Vincent's Hospital site in South County

Dublin. It has been the intention for many years to develop a new National Maternity Hospital and to co-locate it beside an adult acute hospital to ensure that women and babies have access to the full range of medical specialities. St Vincent's Healthcare Group made the land available to the state at no cost in order to facilitate the relocation of the hospital. Following debate with regard to the governance of the new hospital, it was confirmed by the Minister for Health that the new hospital would have clinical operational and financial independence, and would retain its existing identity, ethos and governance model. A month later, it was announced that the Religious Sisters of Charity, who had founded the original St Vincent's Hospital, intended ending their involvement with St Vincent's Healthcare Group.

In June the third annual report of notifications in accordance with the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act, 2013, was laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas. The report indicated that twenty-five abortions had been carried out under the Act in 2016. Eight terminations arose from a risk to the mother of physical illness, one from a risk of suicide and sixteen from emergencies arising from physical illness.

Also in June the report of the Citizens' Assembly on the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution was published. The Citizens' Assembly was established as part of the programme for government to consider a number of matters, including constitutional reform. It was directed to first consider the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution (Article 40.3.3), which acknowledges the equal right to life of the mother and her unborn child. The assembly is made up of ninety-nine citizens and Chairperson Ms Justice Mary Laffoy.

In response to the Citizens' Assembly report, a joint committee of the Houses of the Oireachtas was established to examine the issue of the Eighth Amendment. The report of the joint committee was published in December. It is anticipated that a referendum on the Eighth Amendment will be held in summer 2018.

## **Home-care scheme**

In January the Minister of State with Special Responsibility for Mental Health and Older People, Helen McEntee, TD announced that a consultation process would be launched with a view to establishing a new statutory home-care scheme. The objective of the home-care scheme is to complement the Nursing Home Support (Fair Deal) Scheme, but to give people the option of being cared for in their own homes.

It is estimated that about 20 per cent of the over-65 population receive some form of assistance in the home annually from the state. In 2017 the HSE had a target of delivering 10.57 million home-help hours and 16,750 home-care packages. At present, home care is not regulated by the state and is not provided on a statutory basis. The purpose of the consultation process is to determine what type of home-care scheme is best for Ireland.

In April Minister McEntee published a report by the Health Research Board, which had been commissioned by the Department of Health to examine evidence from the regulation and financing of home care in Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and Scotland. The review describes regulatory measures, such as legislation, national standards, staff and provider accreditation, eligibility and needs assessment, financing of regulation and financing of formal home care services themselves.

The review concludes that there are several principles included in regulated home care in other countries, such as standards, transparency, consultation, choice, equity and sustainability. These principles are implemented through legislation, policy, strategy, service planning and financing.

Minister McEntee further indicated that a dedicated team had been established within the department to progress the home-care scheme.

## **New hospitals**

In April Minister Harris announced that the government had approved the investment required to enable the National Paediatric Hospital Development Board to award construction contracts and commence work on the project. Subsequently, work began on the drafting of the Children's Health Bill, 2017. The bill will establish a single statutory entity to take over the services of the existing three Dublin children's hospitals – Our Lady's Children's Hospital, Crumlin; Temple Street Children's Hospital; and the National Children's Hospital at Tallaght.

Construction contracts were also signed during the year to commence work on the new National Forensic Mental Health Service complex at Portrane in Dublin, which will replace the Central Mental Hospital in Dundrum. The new complex will also include a thirty-bed intensive care rehabilitation unit and a ten-bed forensic child and adolescent mental health unit.

## **Foster care abuse enquiry**

In February the HSE published the Conal Devine and Resilience Ireland consultancy reports into certain issues relating to a former foster home in Waterford. The two reviews had been carried out at the request of the HSE in 2012 and 2015, respectively, but had not previously been published.

The publication of the reports followed revelations by *RTÉ Investigates* in 2015 concerning the story of ‘Grace’, a young woman with profound intellectual disabilities who was left in a foster home in the Waterford area for almost twenty years despite a succession of serious abuse allegations. She was one of forty-seven children placed with the foster family over a twenty-year period.

A state commission of investigation into the scandal was established during the middle of the year.

## **Review of private practice in public hospitals**

In December an independent review group was established to examine the removal of private practice from public acute hospitals. The establishment of the group was a key recommendation arising from *Sláintecare*, the report of the Oireachtas Committee on the Future of Healthcare. The review group will examine the existing nature, level and role of private practice in public hospitals, and its positive and negative impacts as regards access to healthcare, equity and operational matters. The group has commenced a public consultation process.

## **National Cancer Strategy 2017–2026**

In July a ten-year cancer strategy was published. The strategy sets out four goals: reduce the cancer burden, provide optimal care, maximise patient involvement and quality of life, and enable and assure change.

## **Organ donation**

In 2017 a record number of 308 transplant operations were carried out in Irish hospitals. In December the Department of Health published a report on the public consultation phase of a proposed Human Tissue Bill. This indicates strong public support for legislation in respect of an opt-out, rather than the current opt-in, donor system.

**Change of minister of state**

As part of Leo Varadkar's cabinet reshuffle on becoming Taoiseach in June, Jim Daly, TD, replaced Helen McEntee as the Minister of State with Special Responsibility for Mental Health and Older People at the Department of Health.