

Presentation by Senator John Dolan to the Future of Health Care committee.

1. I welcome the opportunity to make a short presentation to the Committee on the Future of Health Care. The committee seeks to achieve a consensus around a long term vision for health care and the direction of health policy in Ireland. Consensus is necessary but achievement of an effective and efficient system that protects the health and well-being of all is critical. If people are confident that we have a robust and comprehensive health service, they will have confidence to participate more in the economic and social life of the country.
2. In this short presentation I will make a number of points that strike me after nearly four decades involved with the disability movement.
3. Disability does not discriminate against who it affects. It cuts across all areas of our society. Young and old, urban and rural, well off and those experiencing poverty. Disability is a major issue for Ireland. The health status of a population is critical to its social and economic advancement.
4. What we term disability is very different now than four decades ago. Now it is also useful to refer to “disabling conditions” as we realise we are all on a continuum that leads to restricted ability and reduced functioning.
5. Some people are born with disabilities and disabling conditions. But many acquire or develop them over the course of their lives, for example, as a result of injury, lifestyle, predisposition or relating to age. And some can have more than one condition. Altogether, while people with disabilities and disabling conditions are a minority of the overall population, they constitute a majority of the people using health services.
6. Advances in information, knowledge, technology, treatments, earlier diagnosis and information on causal factors mould the environment in which we operate. But we are not fully exploiting the opportunities and potential which these bring.
7. An improved health service will mean that more people will survive birth, early childhood and ill health, and will live longer. But then the complexity of health needs to be catered for will also increase. The future of health services should therefore focus on and invest in prevention, early intervention and amelioration. This can only serve to relieve long-term demand and cost on health services.
8. More generally, the current structures and delivery systems of services, and the way society thinks about disability and chronic illness, exacerbates rather than alleviates the associated problems.
9. Services must be remoulded so that every person leads and as far as possible self-manages their own situation. Health professionals need to be able to optimise working in partnership with the people they are working with, their families and support networks. Primary and community care infrastructure is key to this.

10. Beyond this, it must be recognised that the success of the health and care services in supporting and responding to disability and disabling conditions is significantly dependant on factors outside of the health sector.

11. Accessible and available transport, including public transport; accessible public buildings and spaces; accessible information; the opportunity and means to have contact and interaction with others; good and appropriate housing; access to education, training and employment; sufficient income. These areas must be planned for and improved in tandem with the health and personal social services.

12. Every Department and public body has a role to play in knitting the tapestry that will optimise the health and wellbeing of all our people and maximise the participation of people with disabilities and disabling conditions. The health and wellbeing of all is a core matter for the whole of Government and not something for one Department alone.

13. Disability is not a “sector” in Ireland; disability and disabling conditions are “societal” issues. There cannot be an economically and socially thriving Ireland without effectively addressing the inevitability of disability and disabling conditions.

Senator John Dolan

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