



Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation

Cumann Altraí agus Ban Cabhrach na hÉireann

Working Together

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Opening Statement – Phil Ní Sheaghda, Joint Committee on Health on the Welfare and Safety of Workers in the Public Health Service

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Health Committee today on the very timely and important topic of the welfare and safety of workers in the public health service. I am joined today by Silvia Chambers, a paediatric nurse in a busy Dublin hospital who has first-hand experience of both physical and verbal assault in her workplace.

Violence and aggression against nurses and midwives is not a new phenomenon and is one the INMO has been campaigning on for many years on behalf of our members. Over 63% of all incidents of assault that occur against HSE workers are levelled against nurses and midwives. Between January 2021 and October 2022, there were 5,593 reported assaults against nursing and midwifery staff. We know that this figure does not include assaults against nurses and midwives in Section 38 facilities, we also know that many nurses and midwives don't report incidents of assault. It is not acceptable that in a profession that is overwhelmingly made up of women, that at least ten assaults occur every single day.

As we continue to have very real and meaningful society-wide conversations on ending violence against women, the level of assault against nurses and midwives goes against the ideals of the Istanbul Convention, which Ireland recently ratified. We must ensure that all nurses and midwives working in the health service can do so without a threat to their safety, dignity, and bodily and psychological integrity.

Employers must take a preventative approach to protect those exposed to violence in the workplace in accordance with the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005. Where an employer has failed in their duty under this Act resulting in the injury of workers, they should be subject to prosecution. Employers must fully support nurses and midwives who are victims of assault in the workplace and pursue the prosecution of perpetrators in accordance with the Criminal Justice Act 2006 and the Non-Fatal Offences Against the Person Act 1997, as appropriate.

According to data from the Health and Safety Authority, HSE staff reported 4,796 workplace related physical, verbal, and sexual assaults in 2021, yet only 446 investigations and inspections took place (HSA, 2021). These statistics cannot be ignored, and urgent action is required.

The HSA's legislative role under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 is to protect workers and those affected by a work activity from occupational injury and illness. The

increasing assaults, burnout, and occupational infections cannot be ignored and resourcing the HSA must be prioritised to underpin improvements in the environments of work for healthcare workers. It must act on the unsafe conditions many members are working in, and patients are presenting to. The HSA has a duty to inspect workplaces and ensure that all measures are in place to provide a safe environment for employees. This is not being adhered to in the vast majority of hospitals and the HSA must be supported to increase its presence in these workplaces.

The HSA must a separate division dealing with health services and increase the frequency of inspections and issuing of improvement notices and fines for health service employers who fail to protect and reduce risk to their employees.

The HSE must also take on this issue head on. The INMO is again repeating our call for a full review and audit of security systems and protocols in Irish hospitals. An audit has not been completed since 2016, and as recent tragic events in the Mercy Hospital have shown, it is time to rectify this situation.

We often describe our hospitals as pressure-cooker type environments and the circumstances our members found themselves working since last July have borne out this description. Within the acute hospital service, nurses and midwives are working in impossible conditions to provide the safest care possible, but their workplaces are dangerous. Basic safety is not guaranteed in understaffed and overcrowded wards and emergency departments. Since July 2022, over 77,141 patients have been admitted to hospital without a bed. The return of consistent overcrowding is significantly impacting the mental and physical health of nurses and midwives.

The health, safety and wellbeing of nurses and midwives directly impact the ability of healthcare employers to recruit and retain staff. As consistently outlined by the INMO, there is a critical recruitment and retention problem within the Irish health system. The continued lack of a multi annual funded workforce plan incorporating robust recruitment and retention strategies contributes to problems already evident due to the baseline shortage.

To retain and attract new entrants into the professions, it is essential to consider how the current environment can affect retention and recruitment and the intention to leave.

The Framework on Safe Nurse Staffing and Skill Mix must be underpinned by legislation to ensure what is scientifically proven as a safety measure is appropriately funded and operationalised. Failing to do so will mean a yearly battle for funding that will continue to impact patient care, with missed care, delayed discharge, readmission, and higher mortality.

The recruitment of nurses, and all nurse staffing matters, must be guided by The Framework for Safe Nurse Staffing and Skills Mix. The Framework must be funded, underpinned by legislation, and expanded across health and social services.

The best way to attract staff to the Irish health service and to keep nurses, midwives, and the patients they are trying their best to care for safe is to have enough staff. We know that the Framework for Safe Nurse Staffing has been scientifically proven as a safety measure. Failing to underpin it by legislation will mean the annual battle for funding will continue to impact on patient care and staff safety.