

Joint Committee on Health Opening Statement

Secretary General Robert Watt

Wednesday 27th September 2023

Introduction

Good morning, Chairperson and Members of the Committee. I am delighted to be before the Committee this morning to update you on the progress of Sláintecare, in particular as it relates to workforce planning.

I am joined here today by my colleagues from the Department, Ms Rachel Kenna, Chief Nursing Officer, and Ms Breda Rafter, Principal Officer for Strategic Workforce Planning.

Sláintecare Progress

Progress on Sláintecare Implementation has continued this year with highlights including:

- The HSE Health Regions Implementation Plan was approved by Government on 25 July 2023.
- 558 Consultants have now signed the new public only consultant contract, including 157 new entrants.
- The Enhanced Community Care Programme continue to make progress. Nearly 50,000 patient contacts were made by Integrated Care Programme for Older Persons (ICPOP) teams in the year to July with 69% of patients discharged home. In the same time 310,00 people were reviewed by the Chronic Disease management programme, with 91% of those patients now exclusively managed in primary care.
- The largest expansion in eligibility for GP care without charges ever undertaken in the history of the State with free GP Visit Cards to children

aged 6 and 7 commencing on 11 August and the extension of cards to those who earn the median household income or less commencing on 11 September.

- On 1 September, the free contraception scheme was expanded to include women aged 27 to 30 years old.

Workforce

We are, as the committee is aware, amid the largest expansion of the healthcare workforce in the history of the Irish State. In August the total workforce stood at 142,468 WTE equating to 161,634 people employed in our health services. This is an increase of approximately 22,500 more WTEs employed in our health services, or 19% since the beginning of 2020.

This expansion includes over 6,500 extra nurses and midwives, over 3,000 health and social care professionals and over 2,000 additional doctors and dentists.

Alongside this unprecedented expansion in workforce, we are also, as members will be aware, facing unprecedented demands. We have a rapidly growing population and one which is aging as never before. That increased burden is felt acutely in our health services – we see for example that ED attendances by those aged over 75 are up 21% in the last four years, while admissions from ED by over 75s are up 15%.

Minister Donnelly has committed to continuing to grow and expand our workforce over the coming years, as well as ensuring that they work differently and more efficiently if we are to meet the growing and changing needs of our people.

Domestic Supply of Healthcare Workers

While we hear much commentary about healthcare professionals emigrating, the reality is that Ireland has both inward and outward migration of health professionals.

Approximately 70% of our Nursing and Midwifery Workforce entering the register in 2022 were educated abroad. While Ireland has a relatively high number of nurses per capita among OECD countries, more than 45% of the overall nursing and midwifery workforce, as of December 2022, was not trained in Ireland. There remains, therefore, an urgent need to increase the domestic supply of Nurses and Midwives to meet expected increases in demand, and to reduce Ireland's reliance on foreign educated Nurses and Midwives.

Similarly, Ireland had the 4th highest proportion of foreign educated doctors, among OECD members in 2021, at over 40%.

Clearly, our health service could not function without these staff. Given the enormous international competition for healthcare staff, it is worth saying that we are enormously grateful to them for choosing to work in the Irish health service. That said, it is also the case that continued reliance on healthcare staff from abroad is neither ethical nor sustainable – we will simply have to educate and train far more healthcare professionals ourselves.

As I have said before to this committee, with 1,403 medical student places available in the Irish Higher Education System in 2021/22 we have the highest medical graduate output per capita in the OECD. However, at 46%, far too high a proportion of these graduates is made up of non-EU students. The result is

that many of those who graduate from Irish Medical Schools return home for their further training and are lost to our health service.

This historic undersupply of doctors within the Irish medical education and training system has contributed to a situation where there is an overreliance on foreign-educated doctors and relatively few Consultants when compared against our international peers.

Undergraduate Places

Working in close collaboration with DHFHERIS and Higher Education Sector, Minister Donnelly has begun to significantly increase the number of student training places across Medicine, Nursing and Midwifery and Health and Social Care Professionals.

We already have in place an agreement with the Medical Schools, co-funded by the Department of Health, which will see an increase of 200 in the number of Irish/EU student places in medicine by 2026. This is a good start, but I acknowledge, no more than that.

Between 2014 and 2021 first-year nursing and midwifery places in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) grew from 1,570 to 2,032 – an increase of almost 30%.

An additional 662 student places are being provided in the Higher Education Sector on health-related courses in the academic year 2023/24.

This includes approximately 200 student places which the Department is directly funding in Northern Ireland.

Further work is underway to increase the domestic supply of health care professionals.

A recent Higher Education Authority Expressions of Interest process found that, with investment, an additional 208 doctors, 692 nurses, 196 pharmacists, and 63 dentists could potentially be trained annually. This will require significant public investment which will have to be considered in the context of future Budgetary and Estimates processes.

A similar process is expected to be conducted by the HEA in relation to therapy disciplines.

Postgraduate Medical Training

€4.6m in additional funding was provided in Budget 2023 by Minister Donnelly for additional intern and post-graduate medical training places. This facilitated an increase of 133 specialist training doctors in the health service. 24 extra Intern posts were provided in July 2023 bringing the total number of doctor Intern posts available for the July 2023/24 intake to 879.

The Department has been working closely with the HSE, and Postgraduate Training Bodies, to increase the number of training places and Consultant posts available.

- The total number of interns increased by 12% over the last five years period, while the Initial Specialist Training intake increased by 21%, and the Higher Specialist Training intake increased by 27%
- The number of doctors in training in Ireland now stands at 4,167 (excluding interns), an increase of 4.5% since 2021/22.

- The number of Year 1 Higher Specialist Training (HST) posts increased by 10%, from 573 in 2021/22 to 629 in 2022/23.
- The number of approved Consultant posts increased by 9% from 3,797 in 2021 to 4,152 in 2022.

GP Training

The Annual intake to the GP training scheme has been increased by over 80% since 2015. The number of GPs entering training has been increased to 287 this year, with 350 places now planned for next year. From 2023 to 2027 we expect that between 1.5 and 3.1 GP graduates will enter the service for each retiring GP. This “replacement rate” is a crude but useful measure that shows a resulting expected increase in GP capacity.

Nursing

All Nursing and Midwifery and Health and Social Care Graduates, who are successful at interview, are offered employment contracts in the HSE. We also recognise the importance of supporting people throughout their careers by developing career pathways, including specialist and advanced practice opportunities, for Nurses and Midwives, and for Health and Social Care Professionals. Having people operating to the full extent of their qualifications will be essential if we are to meet the growing health and social care needs of our population. The Minister in 2021 set a target of having 3% of the nursing and midwifery workforce at advanced practice level. As of August 2023, the total number of both registered and candidate advanced nursing and midwifery practitioners was 1,004 WTE.

Workforce Planning

In 2021, the Department initiated a project which aims to use scenario-based projections and modelling of health and social care workforce supply and demand to inform ongoing strategic health and social care workforce planning. A key element is the development of the Health and Social Care Workforce Planning Model which offers an approach for projecting our potential long-term staffing needs for the health sector.

This analysis suggests that we will therefore, notwithstanding the progress we have made in recent years, need many more healthcare professionals in the future than the Irish Higher Education Sector is currently producing.

Workforce planning is not only about training more healthcare professionals. We will also of course, have to do much more. We will have to find new ways of working. We must improve productivity by working and training in different ways. We will have to maximise retention of staff. Lastly, we will have to move to a seven-day service right across the health service if we are to meet the health needs of our people in future years.

The foundation though of all that, is that we build a sustainable model and become more self-reliant as a nation in producing sufficient healthcare professionals to meet our future needs.

Ends.