

Opening Statement.
Professor Patrick Mallon
June 24th 2020

I would like to thank the Chair and the Committee for inviting me to appear today and for the opportunity to make this opening statement.

Ireland is making steady progress in emerging from the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, that has caused a significant number of deaths and damaged our economy, the education of our children and the provision of healthcare. Ireland has arrived at this point largely due to unprecedented support, sacrifices and actions of the Irish People at the request of the government following the advice of Public Health officials. The Irish People have chosen this path at considerable personal cost, primarily to protect the lives of their family and fellow citizens. As a result, Ireland now holds the advantage in our war against the SARS-CoV-2 virus, with the potential to maintain infections at an absolute minimum.

It is vital that we do this properly.

We are only now beginning to understand the impact of this first wave on the health of our citizens. There is no effective pharmaceutical treatment or vaccine to prevent acquisition or spread of this infection. In addition to the large number of deaths we have witnessed in Ireland, as highlighted earlier this week to this committee, many of those affected, even young and healthy individuals, experience considerable morbidity and prolonged recovery times. Accepting any level of ongoing community transmission puts people's health at risk and will further hold back economic recovery.

Ongoing community transmission, such as that seen in the United States, Sweden and parts of the United Kingdom, together with resurgence of cases in Lisbon and the outbreaks reported in Germany serve to highlight that Ireland is still very much within a geographical high risk zone for COVID-19. I and others in the Infectious Diseases clinical community believe that is inevitable that we will experience a resurgence of cases as we relax restrictions and permit more travel.

In this context, control of SARS-CoV-2 virus within our communities, through a highly effective programme of rapid testing, contact tracing and community actions, becomes a priority in maintaining our national biosecurity. Effective community control permits a more stable and meaningful economic recovery, recovery of education for our children, recovery of our health services, including vital screening services, restoration of quality of life and improvements in mental and physical wellbeing.

In many ways, this programme becomes the beating pulse of our country. At the present time, as society opens up again, the Irish People are handing back some of the responsibility for controlling SARS-CoV-2 in Ireland to the State. If this programme fails to work effectively, we risk losing the gains provided to us through the sacrifices of the Irish People.

Both Infectious Diseases Physicians and leading figures within the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland have called for a written, detailed, coherent plan dealing with control of the SARS-

CoV-2 virus on the Island of Ireland. This should include a detailed end-to-end testing and contact tracing plan, embedded with rapid turnaround times and clear key performance indicators (KPI). Alongside this, greater investment during the coming weeks to rapidly upscale emergency department capacity and isolation room facilities in hospitals is also required. These actions would be best achieved through the establishment and resourcing of specialist networks operating regionally under a common governance structure. These networks should comprise relevant specialists and be linked to our extensive academic university infrastructure. This will enable scalable, rapid, regional responses to both current and future threats as they arise and evolve, enable rapid implementation of national guidance and adherence to national KPIs.

I would like to finish by saying that, despite the optimism in some quarters in recent weeks, we are still in the midst of a national health emergency and our citizens are at no less risk of severe illness and death if they contract COVID-19 infection now than they were back in March.

Lessons learned from the first wave of COVID-19 need to be translated into actions and resources, but we have a very narrow window of opportunity. At a time when the incidence of COVID-19 infections in Ireland is relatively low, we need to avoid complacency and ensure that this time is used wisely to improve our infrastructure. Failure to learn, or delays in planning and resourcing for what is ahead, would not only be potentially negligent but would be a travesty to the memories of those who have died from COVID-19, some avoidably, during the first wave.