

Press release... for immediate release Wednesday February 27th ...

1,000 neurological patients on 4 year hospital waiting list

- 38% wait more than a year to see a neurologist

Urgent action to tackle the growing impact of neurological service deficits was demanded today (Wednesday February 27th) after it emerged that over 1,000 patients have been waiting for more than four years to see a neurologist in a public hospital outpatients clinic.

The call was made by the Neurological Alliance of Ireland – the umbrella group for the country’s neurological not for profit organisations – in response to new figures which also showed that a total of 5,580 adult and child patients with conditions such as epilepsy, Parkinson's, multiple sclerosis and severe migraine have been forced to wait over a year for an appointment.

In addition, 989 out of a total of 2,700 patients requiring neurosurgery were forced to wait more than six months– with the longest being left untreated for over three years.

The latest figures emerged following a Freedom of Information request by the NAI in advance of a Dail briefing for TDs and Senators today at which the organisation highlighted the fact that services for people with neurological conditions in Ireland are by far the worst in Europe.

Said NAI chairman, Chris Macey: “These statistics are truly shocking – showing that 38% of patients are waiting more than 12 months for an outpatients appointment and 37% requiring neurosurgery being left untreated for over six months.

“When you combine these waiting lists with the huge deficits that exist in neurorehabilitation services for people living with the effects of car crashes, brain tumours, strokes and a range of other serious conditions, what you are left with is suffering on a monumental scale in every town and parish the length and breadth of Ireland – much of it avoidable. We need urgent action to prioritise the development of better services, both in hospital and the community for people with neurological conditions.”

Consultant neurologist Professor Orla Hardiman said that the long delays are not acceptable either to doctors or the population at large, particularly as Ireland prepares to host the European Month of the Brain in May this year as part of its EU presidency. Ireland will host a

major Europe wide conference which will include a focus on how our health system manages diseases of the brain.

She notes that, to a large extent, the solution in reducing waiting lists for neurology lies not in increased funding for services, but through reorganisation of what's already there.

"We don't need more money, we just need to be cleverer about the way we deliver the services people need. There are many barriers and blocks, historical practices and poor organisational structures that reduce the effectiveness of existing services," she declared.

"In tackling service deficits, it's more important to look at the quality of services that people are getting than the length of waiting lists. If patients are seen quicker, but are just getting a yellow pack service, that's no good either."

The waiting list figures emerged a week after the NAI launched its *Neurorehabilitation Manifesto* to highlight the fact that whilst an estimated 150,000 out of some 700,000 people living with neurological conditions in Ireland require ongoing rehabilitation, services across large swathes of the country are fragmented, patchy, or non-existent.

Existing services provided by not for profit organisations continue to endure swingeing cutbacks, of up to 25% in some cases, forcing the downgrading and closure of vital community programmes countrywide.

Mr Macey said that neurorehabilitation services in Ireland are recognised to be the worst in Europe. And even if the improvements being sought were implemented, they would still be worse than those in any other European country with the exception of the UK.

"For example, we currently have 7 consultants to serve acute neurorehabilitation needs across the whole country. But even if we had 50 we would still have the lowest number per capita in Europe with the exception of the UK. And if it increased to 150, we would still be behind countries like Estonia, Latvia, Czech Republic, Croatia and Serbia."

"In other words, what we are really aspiring to is not to have services that any country could be proud of, or even services that are mediocre – but to be the second worst country in Europe for neurorehabilitation."

An NAI survey of people across the spectrum of neurological conditions has also found that the vast majority are not receiving the community rehabilitation services they need to rebuild their lives. The study showed that that:

- 71% couldn't access any neuropsychology service
- 68% said physiotherapy and speech and language therapy were inadequate or not available.
- 80% couldn't access adequate residential or day services
- 78% could not get proper counselling services

