

Quality, Excellence, Delivery: The Irish Medical Organisation AGM 2026

The Irish Medical Organisation annual conference was held on April 9-11, 2026. These conferences, that represent all branches of the profession, have been taking place since 1984. This year's conference was well attended with over 150 delegates. It was an action-packed programme. There were four hot topic sessions, three panel discussions, and three general motions sections. There were presentations by both the Minister for Health Jennifer Carroll MacNeill and the HSE CEO Ms. Anne O'Connor. The final event was the address of the incoming IMO president, Prof. Matthew Sadlier.

The Minister said that rather than working harder, the system must work differently. There is the need for seven-day hospital services and consultant rostering at weekends. Reforms are necessary to address the daily pressures of an older population. The health budget for 2026 is €27.4 billion. The State cannot keep spending more without spending smarter. Slaintecare 2025+ was reaffirmed with success measured by falling waiting times and lower costs for families. The lived-in experiences of foreign doctors were acknowledged and the need for greater support.

Anne O'Connor spoke about the pressures on our health systems due to a growing and aging population and that we should invest not just in acute hospital bed capacity alone, but in general practice and community care and an age-friendly healthcare system. She raised concerns about violence towards healthcare workers. The delivery of mental health services and the impact of addiction also received mention.

Arabella Skinner, Director of Policy at Health Professionals for Safer Screens in the UK, spoke about screentime and children. Smart phones affect every aspect of a child's life. In excess, they can lead to social isolation, physical changes to the brain, sleep disturbance, poor relationships, and mental health issues. She stated that 98% of 2-year-old children are exposed to a screen daily. Children are less happy than 18 years ago. There are higher rates of self-harm among 14-year-old girls. In the 1990s, the incidence of myopia was 24%, now it is 36% due to excessive screen use. Among teenagers, there are fewer social skills and less motor skills. There is an inability to control the use of screens among children with the neglect of other normal healthy activities. Ironically, children with restricted screen times have been found to be more digitally competent. In the UK, the knife images on social media have led to an increase in knife crimes. The impact and influence are very different to that of TV. TV is slow and has a beginning, middle, and an end compared with screens which are turbo-

charged. Also, the child watches TV in the company of other people whereas screens are a solitary activity. Clearly there needs to be more guidance about digital safety, child development, and responsible technology.

A panel discussion on international doctors in Ireland generated considerable interest. Approximately one quarter of doctors practicing in Ireland are from non-EU countries, the largest numbers being from Pakistan and Sudan. Three doctors described their experiences working in this country, their current posts being in Psychiatry, GP, and ED. Their feedback was mostly positive. The themes that were raised included better structural induction, psychological safety, fairer progression, and inclusion without assimilation. An individual's cultural differences should be understood. Local accents are a problem and can make communication challenging. A video for overseas doctors about common Irish culture would be helpful. Also, they should be informed at an early stage about the existing support organisations such as the IMO and the ICGP.

This is the second term as president for Matthew Sadlier. He said that he has been part of the IMO since 2008. In the interim, he talks about how the world has changed, how medicine has changed. Some programmes have succeeded while others have stalled. The pandemic had a major impact on the health services. There is a new emphasis on public health. NCHDs have a crucial role in the healthcare service. Currently, there are 8,579 NCHDs, with 2,600 of them in non-training posts. Matthew entered medicine in UCD in 1993. For the first time, he was introduced to many students from non-EU countries. He found, however, that he had more in common with them than many of his schoolmates, namely a desire to train to be a good doctor. Medicine is global. It is shameful that overseas doctors who come to this country are exposed to racism. As doctors, we must call it out. However, in general, doctors should stay within their sphere of expertise, and they should not get involved in conflict politics. There are contract negotiations this year. It is an odd process with sessions lasting 6-7 hours. For long periods, nothing seems to be happening. The late Sean Tierney was specifically mentioned for his great skills as a contract negotiator. The GP chronic disease project has been a success, involving 400,000 patients. The persisting challenges for GPs are recruitment, retention, and staffing. It has been a transformative four years for consultants. The goal is not about radical change; it is about improvement. We focus too much on the negative and not enough on the positive aspects of the health service. The trolley count, to some extent, is created by the humanity of nurses and doctors. Nobody is turned away. In some countries, when the ED is full, patients are left waiting in ambulances.

Matthew expressed his concerns about smart phones and excessive screen time, particularly for children and young people. They lead to the weaponization of our emotions. It turns what should be a normal human experience into a remote technological event. There needs to be a greater awareness of the risks associated with this technology.

In his concluding remarks, he paid tribute to the wonderful work of Susan Clyne in her role of CEO of the IMO. On a personal note, he spoke about the wonderful support of his wife and children.

J.F.A. Murphy
Editor