

Covid-19 and General Practice: Interview with Dr. Ray Walley, Member of the National Covid-19 GP Liaison Committee

How has General Practice Responded to the Covid-19 Crisis:

- The National Covid-19 GP Liaison Committee has had a teleconference every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning over the last 5 weeks.
- The IMO and the ICGP representatives have a teleconference every evening.
- The ICGP has a very comprehensive website on Covid-19 with sections on algorithms, infection control, use of PPEs, therapeutics and resources. The information is updated daily.
- Both the IMO and ICGP have utilized social media as a priority method of communication. The IMO twitter has had an additional 3500 followers in the last month.
- The IMO have formulated social welfare certification for patients advised to self-isolate and those with Covid-19 illness. It has facilitated the computerization of certificates (e certs) with expectant 100% cover in the next few months.
- The IMO and the ICGP have provided expert medical opinion to inform on complex national health debate. They have worked with the Medical Council and the State public health apparatus.

How has the Covid-19 crisis affected GPs:

- Patients are being seen by appointment.
- There is a buzzer on the door to control the flow of patients.
- The toilets are well-stocked with sanitizers and paper.
- PPEs are available if required.
- There are a lot more patient reviews over the phone.
- GPs have received legal guidance from Medisec and the MPS on telephone and televised consultations.
- Advance care planning and prescriptions are being completed for patients with chronic conditions.
- Antenatal maternity care and childhood immunizations remain priority groups.

Out-of-Hours Service:

- There is triage and advice over the phone.
- Patients are advised to come to specific centres dependent on Covid or non-Covid symptoms.
- There are a limited number of home visits still being undertaken.

The Non-Covid-19 Patients:

There are concerns that patients with conditions such as stroke or MLs may present later during the crisis. Dr. Walley, in a recent interview on RTE, emphasised that 'GPs are open for business'. It is important that patients with worrying symptoms do not defer contacting their GP. The IMO and ICGP have also emphasised this point in recent press releases.

GPs and Nursing Homes:

Dr. Walley stated that he has a number of patients spread across two nursing homes. He has provided them with advance prescriptions. He has checked that their resuscitation status is up-to-date. He remains accessible if required. Recently, the Coroner has communicated that a senior member of the nursing team can certify death instead of the GP.

The Clinical Profile of the Covid-19 Patients:

Many of the patients have a mild disease. The two factors influencing severity are age and co-morbidities. The morbidities that he is encountering are obesity, COPD, cardiovascular disease and hypertension. He commented on the loss of taste and smell experienced by many patients with Covid-19. He described how this has led to deteriorating diabetic control in one of his patients.

Covid-19 Testing:

The criteria are changing as the pandemic evolves. The emphasis is now on healthcare workers and high-risk patients. Dr. Walley points out that testing is helpful in contact tracing but it does not alter management. If a patient has the key clinical features he should be considered positive.

First Awareness:

Dr. Walley and his colleagues first noticed an increase in the number of patients with a 'flu like illness from mid-February.