

Covid-19 and General Practice: Part 7

Interview with Dr Raymond Walley General Practitioner and Associate Clinical Professor of General Practice, UCD MRCGP FRCGP and member of the IMO / ICGP / HSE Covid-19 GP liaison Committee

Throughout the Pandemic General Practice in Ireland has been at the forefront of the fight against Covid since early 2021. The first cases initially presented in general practice. Practices adapted to a closed-door telephone/triage first engagement.

By the winter of 2022 after several waves of Covid General Practice albeit operating from a closed-door phone/ intercom first engagement approach were operating at full tilt. Face to face consultations after appropriate triage by administrative/nursing staff make up most contacts.

The below list includes the main areas where work continues:

- Covid telephone assessment/testing referrals
- Covid respiratory assessments
- Chronic Disease management
- Ante/per/post-natal care
- Children's immunisation
- Cervical smears
- Phlebotomy
- Minor surgery

The statistics showing the prodigious workload achieved by General Practice are impressive.

The list below includes some of the recent media headlines relating to the vaccination programme:

- Approximately 2.62 million vaccines (across primary and additional courses) have been administered by GPs as of 5th December out of a total of 8.4m.
- GP's have primarily vaccinated all those people over 70 where we have achieved very high uptake on the primary vaccination campaign.
- GPs administered over 73,000 vaccines last week w/c 29th November.
Over 1,300 practices have received booster deliveries/opted into the booster programme bringing a capacity of 80,000+ per week. Other practices have the option to refer patients to a CVC for vaccination.
- We expect that more than 75% of GPs will continue with the booster programme beyond the over 70s cohort
- GP's have also assisted with housebound patient referrals and identification of medically vulnerable patients where required.
- As of 10th December 2021 - 880,000 flu vaccines have been administered. In the previous winter programme, 70% were provided in General Practice.

Cervical Smear Testing

Over 98% of all samples taken have been taken in the community setting (that is, c.2% are taken in colposcopy). The majority of samples taken in the community are taken by GPs and practice nurses in GP practice settings.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Samples processed</u>
2019	229,176
2020	168,792
2021* [Jan to Aug]	244,643

PCR Testing

Even through the Covid daily slog Covid General Practice was responsible on a regular basis for 5-6000 PCR test referrals daily after consultation. This is in the context of a direct access PCR testing system that was at many times at maximum access. General practice referrals were prioritised in recognition of the severity of the cases that we were likely to be dealing with.

Influenza Surveillance

It should be noted that The General Practice sentinel programme, continues to be a significant tool in monitoring both influenza and influenza like illness as an early warning mechanism for Infectious Disease management by our Public Health Colleagues.

Chronic Disease Management

At the outset of the pandemic a new Chronic Disease Management programme was initiated for the care of patients over 65 years with the following conditions:

- Atrial fibrillation
- Ischaemic Heart Disease
- Congestive Care Failure
- Type 2 Diabetes Mellitus
- COPD
- Asthma
- Cerebrovascular accident
- Transient ischaemic attack

The programme included a protocol led approach including specific investigations and application of the Q-risk programme.

The programme was recognised internationally with a United Nations award in September 2021 - <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/media/pressrel/hse-wins-international-un-award-for-tackling-chronic-disease.html>

Throughout the pandemic the IMO/ICGP National GP liaison group has met by telephone contact on a weekly basis with high level members of the HSE. It has served as an immediate source of resolution of issues presenting in General Practice and as an early warning system to any concerns for both the IMO/ICGP and our colleagues. The IMO and ICGP secretariat have always shown great leadership and collaboration in the pandemic, and this continues.

The IMO and ICGP has engaged to ensure a regular cascade of information to members changes in Covid-19 algorithms/ educational material/ contract briefings on issues related to general practice care and provision. There has been a recognition of the danger of messaging and information overload in circulating information to GPs and hopefully we have managed this appropriately.

Education and the Media

- Members of the IMO and ICGP National Liaison group have continued to lead on national media communications. This engagement has allowed us to communicate to the public directly General Practice messaging.
- General Practice has become a go to source for accurate informed opinion.
- The ICGP and IMO continued with their regular education webinars and as a resource to all GPS.

It is now the 16th of December 2021 and Ireland's Health Service is facing into a second Christmas in the Covid-19 Pandemic. Ireland lies 10th in the EU/EEA/UK 14-day rate per 100,000 of 1260. Ireland morbidity and mortality rates have thankfully been greatly reduced by its successful Covid-19 vaccine program achieving more than 93% coverage. The infectious delta variant has ensured a stubbornly high rate of infection plateauing at a level of 4600 daily new cases whilst ICU rates have stayed similarly stubborn at 110.

Positivity rates of testing have unfortunately continued to climb since September being 14.7% on December 6th. Omicron is now responsible for 11% of new infections. The WHO has advised that omicron spreads faster and weakens vaccine efficacy. There are concerns with the effectiveness of one and two doses of the vaccines in relation to omicron. NIAC has advised a reduction in the booster gap to three months.

As we head further into December it is early in the Omicron story. General Practitioners and our staff despite the unknowns ahead need to prioritise ensuring that they maintain their good health with some balance of self-care and family life. Our ability to adapt, evolve and innovate as General Practice has been evident over the last 22 months must include personal care.

The challenges that remain in General Practice are:

1. An ageing workforce – 30% over 60 years old
2. Underfunded infrastructure
3. Too small a workforce
4. Underfunded contracts
5. Antiquated out of hours contract

For General Practice to survive, it will require this continued innovation and proactivity which GPs have shown over the last 2 years of the Pandemic, both as individual leaders in their communities and as a collective. It is evident with the chronic care programme how we can be innovators in International Health when resourced. To quote Professor Alan Irvine – “We need more of these good news stories in Irish Healthcare”.

Rosemary Stevens, a medical historian said if General Practice did not exist, it would have to be invented. It is a testament to our profession that comments like this are made.

Paul Reid, CEO of the HSE has acknowledged the heroic work of General Practice in this message:

“Throughout this pandemic the role played by General Practice has been absolutely superb. There is no way that the HSE could have worked through this pandemic to date but for the leadership demonstrated by GPs. They have put themselves to the forefront of all of the responses throughout, whether this was in terms of Covid testing and referrals, vaccinations and boosters, flu campaigns, or supporting an enhanced community and primary care response to relieve the pressure on hospitals. On behalf of the HSE, I’m truly grateful for this support and response. There is no doubt that the public will now have an ever further respect and understanding of the role played by GPs in healthcare in Ireland”.