

The Doolin Memorial Lecture 2024

Delivered by Dr Leo Varadkar

Saturday, Dec 7, 2024 at RCSI, York Street, Dublin

Lecture Title: Health Care Challenges

Dr Matthew Sadlier, IMO Consultant Committee Chair, introduced Dr Leo Varadkar who during his political career has been Minister for Transport, Tourism, and Sport (2011-2014), Minister for Health (2014-2016), Minister for Social Protection (2016-2017), Taoiseach (2017-2020) and (2022-2024).

Dr. Varadkar began by briefly summarising his career to date. He worked for 7 years as a GP, 17 years as a TD and was Fine Gael party leader for 7 years.

He congratulated the two doctors who were elected to Dáil following the recent general election- Dr. Jack Chambers and Dr. Martin Daly. He paid tribute to the outgoing Minister for Health Stephen Donnelly and what he had achieved during his 5 years in office but unfortunately he wasn't re-elected.

Dr. Varadkar stated that if we don't measure, we can't improve. He illustrated this point on a number of occasions throughout his lecture bench-marking Ireland's performance against other EU member countries. He developed a number of themes in relation to healthcare in Ireland – progress over the last 20 years, the statistics, policy deliveries and policy forecasts.

There has been considerable progress in healthcare: life expectancy has improved; the 30-day mortality following admission to hospital after myocardial infarction or stroke has reduced; the hip fracture management for patients over 65 years is more effective with better outcomes, and suicide rates in Ireland are now below the EU average. There are, however, unmet needs for medical and dental examinations.

Health and socialcare now accounts for 13.2% of total employment. The number of practising doctors has increased in recent years. In 2013 there were 9,000 doctors and dentists employed in the public health service and in 2024 there are 14,000. We now have 3.9 doctors per 1000 population which is just above the EU average, and is more than in the UK and Australia. As we achieve the correct complement of doctors the next step is to explore in detail whether we have the right doctors in the right place doing the right thing.

Dr. Varadkar addressed the issue of nursing and nurse numbers. The nursing complement has increased from 31,478 (2013) to 43,949 (2024). He acknowledged the major contribution

provided by overseas nurses who account for half of the nursing workforce. He hoped, however, that this heavy dependency on foreign staff would improve over time.

He discussed the issue of nurses pay which does not compare favourably with other countries and lags behind other sectors of the health service.

The HSCP (health and social care professional) numbers have increased from 10,267 (2013) to 16,260 (2024). These professionals add considerably to the skill-mix in both the hospitals and the community.

Dr. Varadkar predicts that the rapid growth in the healthcare workforce which we have witnessed in recent years will now slow down and start to level off, as the overall numbers working in the health service are now deemed to be comparable with other EU countries.

Health expenditure in Ireland is €4,200 per capita. This is above the EU average and is the same as France. Our gross healthcare budget has increased from €12.5 billion (2016) to €22.8 billion (2024).

A number of capital projects have been undertaken or commenced in recent years. These include the National Children's Hospital, the National Rehabilitation Hospital Dun Laoghaire, the Central Mental Hospital Portrane, and the planned National Maternity Hospital move to St Vincent's. He pointed out however that the pipeline of hospital replacement is currently not happening fast enough and our old hospital structures are an obstacle to the delivery of efficient medical care.

The other challenge is that we do not have a sufficient number of hospital beds. Ireland closed too many beds in the 1980s. Currently we have 2.9 beds per 1000 population, which is below the EU average of 4.7 beds per 1000 population. Ireland needs to increase its hospital bed capacity. One of the consequences of too few beds is that it is the only route by which patients can get into hospital is through the ED. This creates a bottle-neck for many hospitals.

He showed data that demonstrated that young students interest in a career in healthcare has decreased in recent years. This is in part related to the country's full employment and many other competing opportunities. On the positive side our healthcare workforce remains relatively young.

Alcohol consumption in Ireland has decreased between 2010 and 2022. It is now within the EU average. Another positive is the reduced cigarette smoking rates. The proportion of 15-19 year olds who smoke is now down to 7%. The emerging threat, however, is the increased vaping use, Ireland having the 4th highest rates for vaping in the EU.

In the final section of the lecture Dr. Varadkar looked toward the future and what he felt will happen in the forthcoming years. The health budget will grow more slowly. There will be a greater emphasis on the effective use of staff rather than an increase in numbers. Skill-mix needs further development. There is further room for pay, conditions, and staff well-being. Capital investment will continue to grow. This will create opportunities for greater capacity and clinical effectiveness. The advances in technology - AI, Bot Doctor, and the new treatment modalities are very promising. He illustrated this point in relation to Hepatitis C which is now a curable disease. The surge in new medical devices, many from Ireland, is very exciting.

Medical negligence remains a major challenge for the health service. The current adversarial tort system has a chilling effect on doctors who have been involved in lawsuits. Doctors in this country are not more negligent than doctors in other countries. Mishaps occur in all healthcare systems. The IMO has been asking for a no-fault system, however, he feels that at present the political system will balk at this type of reform.

Dr. Varadkar's lecture was very well received by the full auditorium, most of which were practising frontline doctors, who found it interesting to get such an incisive and honest insight into how the delivery of healthcare is perceived from the political perspective. The presentation also provided a picture of the direction of health planning in future years.

JFA Murphy
Editor.