

Lifesaving Cardiac Rehabilitation Service in crisis.

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Lifesaving rehabilitation for heart patients is at ‘absolute crisis point’ in Ireland as no hospital has a full team in place, the Irish Heart Foundation has warned.

The national waiting list to help those recovering from heart attacks, stroke and heart failure has now exceeded 2,800 patients – a 54% increase since 2013 – whilst staffing levels plummeted by 40% over the same period.

Cardiac rehabilitation is now being treated as an ‘optional add on’ in the health sector, according to the Irish Heart Foundation, which uncovered the damning statistics in joint research with the Irish Association of Cardiac Rehabilitation (IACR).

The lack of priority for the service is highlighted by the fact that 77% of centres were closed during the pandemic – the vast majority for more than 12 weeks, despite the fact that high quality cardiac rehabilitation reduces heart disease deaths by around 20%.

“This service was considered world class in 2005, but it's now in absolute crisis,” said Dr Angie Brown, the Irish Heart Foundation’s Medical Director. “HSE recruitment embargoes and chronic under-investment have stripped it bare. Nurses are being transferred to other work and even though it’s an essential service, almost none of our hospitals has all the expertise in place to deliver high quality cardiac rehabilitation.”

Effective cardiac rehabilitation is delivered through a dozen different disciplines, ranging from specialist nursing staff to pharmacists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, smoking cessation specialists and cardiologists. Programmes are managed by CR coordinators - typically a cardiac nurse specialist – who also play a key role in the clinical management and monitoring of patients (e.g. heart rhythm, blood pressure and cholesterol).

A core element of cardiac rehabilitation is monitored exercise training which helps the heart heal itself. This is provided by appropriately trained cardiac nurses and physiotherapists. Psychological support has also been shown to drive the improvements achieved by CR, but the data shows that only 7 of the 35 cardiac rehabilitation centres surveyed have access to a psychologist. Furthermore, 12 centres surveyed did not have access to a physiotherapist.



Since 2010, the number of medical directors in the programme has fallen from 38 to 21, CR co-ordinators from 38 to 31 and dietitians from 36 to 24.

Thirty-three cardiac rehabilitation centres are missing four or more key staff and since 2013, cardiac specialist nurses from 11 centres were transferred to other duties.

In addition, 40% of patients are waiting at least three months for cardiac rehabilitation, when they should be starting courses weeks after hospital discharge.

One patient who knows value of the service is Dubliner Noel Flannery, 52, who had seven stents inserted following a heart attack in March 2020.

The father-of-two went to a “dark place”, struggling to understand why it happened to him given his active lifestyle as a member of Cabra Kayak Club.

However, he was able to access pharmacists to advise him about medication, physio, dietitians, and a psychologist at a cardiac rehabilitation centre at the Mater Hospital.

“It was absolutely brilliant. It was an eight-week course, two days a week and I’d be 100% behind it. It helped me to move on; they were telling me ‘Noel this isn’t the end, it’s not your fault, you can get over it’.”

Dr Angie Brown says the service is a lifeline for people dealing with the physical and psychological impacts of heart attacks.

“In 2005, cardiac rehabilitation in Ireland was world class, but since then it has been chipped away at by recruitment embargoes.

“The patients going in are up 20% but staffing is down 40%. Lack of investment also creates a false economy as the failure to provide a full range of care is impacting on patients who are more likely to end up back in hospital for treatment.

“Someone who has had a serious heart attack and is sent home, for example, should have access to a psychologist. If you don’t get cardiac rehabilitation for three months, that means you are facing the hardest time on your own.”

Ends

Available for interview: Dr Angie Brown, Medical Director, Irish Heart Foundation, Chris Macey, Director of Advocacy, Irish Heart Foundation

