

# 'NO 2ND BOOSTER IF AGED UNDER 60'

**EVERYONE** aged over 60 should get a second Covid booster jab, the EU decided yesterday.

It comes as the summer wave of the virus approaches its peak – with the number of people in hospital going over 1,000 for the first time since March yesterday. But the European Centre for Disease Control and the European Medicine Agency said there is no evidence people under 60 need a

By ADAM HIGGINS

National Immunisation Advisory Committee has been investigating whether younger people should be given another vaccine dose too. It's expected the EU advice will be considered by NIAC before they report back to the Government with a decision.

The HSE expects cases of Covid to peak this week. It's had to close off some wards for infected patients due to the pressure on hospitals. Some 1,055 people had Covid in hospital yesterday, with 40 in ICU.

European Commissioner Stella Kyriakides said: "This is how we protect ourselves, our loved ones and our vulnerable populations." Ireland has already been giving second booster to people aged over 65. The Advice... Kyriakides



# IRISH VIRUS WAR SCREECHED TO A HALT

EXCLUSIVE by ADAM HIGGINS and CRAIG FARRELL

**IRELAND'S "war" on Covid ended seemingly overnight after a €900million testing splurge that saw two million unused rapid tests left on the shelf, it is claimed.**

The Government has come under fire for its "hysterical throw money everywhere at everything" approach that saw GPs paid the equivalent of almost 3,900 staff nurse salaries simply for phoning in pandemic test referrals.

The Irish Sun can also reveal Taoiseach Michael Martin blocked a plan to rollout cut-price antigen tests in pharmacies as the crisis neared its conclusion in late 2021.

Figures released to us under FOI show Ireland has spent in excess of €900million testing people more than 10million times for Covid-19 since the pandemic began – but the HSE has no idea how many PCR tests they bought in that time.

Independent TD Michael McNamara said the "war" seemed to end overnight despite the fact the disease has never gone away.

He told The Irish Sun: "This demonstrates a completely hysterical reaction to Covid. The fact that all of that money could be spent and all of it talked about combatting Covid.

"And then suddenly it's all over and all the restrictions are lifted and all of the discussion of combatting it like a war ends and Covid continues with more or less the same transition rates in the community as before.

"To me, it was a completely irrational reaction. I'm not for a moment suggesting that Covid isn't real or doesn't exist. It does exist, it is real and it is damaging.

"But the response to it was not the response you would expect of a rational Government leading a national response which seemed to be just to throw money everywhere at everything."

New figures detailing the true cost of the HSE's Covid-19 testing system, which continues to run thousands of tests each week, reveal antigen and PCR testing have cost the country a small fortune.

Since the pandemic began, GPs have claimed for more than four million Covid-19 phone consultations at a cost to the HSE of €120,329,850.

That is the equivalent of the €31,109 starting salaries of almost 3,900 staff nurses – or 15 per cent of the bloated cost of the National Children's Hospital in Dublin.

The PCR system is extremely costly with the State forking out hundreds of millions to buy tests and have the swabs processed in labs – with some jetted out to Germany at the height of the crisis.

Some 10,081,576 PCR swabs have been completed in Ireland but the HSE were unable to tell The Irish Sun the total number of PCR testing kits they have purchased.

The HSE said they have not kept a record of how many swabs were bought as the pieces for the kits were bought separately and packed into test kits.

The PCR test system saw pop-up swab centres built across the country, with 1,128 workers employed in the regime at one point. This workforce cost the HSE more than €55million.

Some €7,359,001 was spent delivering and transporting Covid tests over the past two years.

The Defence Forces were previously involved in the transport of Covid tests with the Air Corps used to fly swabs to a German lab for processing.

Three labs were used by the HSE to process PCR tests during the crisis, including the National Virus Reference Lab which is based in University College Dublin.

Tipperary-based lab Enfer, which is owned by businessman Louis Roman, was also used by the HSE, along with Germany-based lab Eurofins.

In total, these three labs have been paid €566,720,720 to process PCR swabs from Ireland. Although the breakdown of how much each lab



Threw cash away... McNamara

## Vast sums wasted on PPE panic purchases

By ADAM HIGGINS

**THE Irish Sun** previously revealed how the HSE panic-purchased hundreds of millions of euro worth of PPE in the first months of the pandemic.

They snapped up masks and gloves from hardware shops, funeral directors and even a bin bag company.

The HSE spent €900million on PPE in 2020 but were forced to bin more than €374million's worth of it after the equipment had gone out of date.

The procurement team at the HSE had frantically contacted a range of businesses across the country seeking to buy up high spec face masks and gloves. A large shipment of gowns and other PPE was purchased from China but was unsuitable for use when it arrived.

The HSE also bought hundreds of ventilators in the first months of the pandemic that were never used.

The health service spend for 2021 has not yet been published.

But it is expected the PPE spend will again run into the hundreds of millions.

The Department of Health spent €25million renting hotels for the mandatory quarantine system that was eventually scrapped because it did not prevent new variants of the disease from arriving into the country.

Independent TD Michael McNamara told The Irish Sun: "The Mandatory Hotel Quarantine was an enormous waste of money."

earned was redacted because of commercial reasons. The Irish Sun understands the National Virus Reference Lab and Enfer make up the bulk of the spending. The HSE has also spent at least €97million processing PCR tests in hospital labs across Ireland during the crisis. The antigen testing system, which the Government was extremely slow to take up, has been significantly cheaper for the HSE. Due to push back from National Public Health Emergency Team members, the Government were slow to roll out antigen testing and instead adopted pilot schemes in hospitals and colleges. It was eventually taken up as an official part of Ireland's response to

## VACC TO NORMAL SUPER QUICKLY

10m Covid tests were left unused



## MR ANTI ANTIGEN

Martin stopped bulk buying of at-home tests



Rapid answer to Covid-19 spread... antigen tests

# THE COVID-19 SPENDEMIC

● **€900m splashed on swabbing us 10m times** | ● **Taoiseach blocked bid to offer cheap antigens**

The response was not rational

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the pandemic late last year with the HSE providing the tests to confirmed cases. Some €56,765,536 has been spent on 4,688,937 antigen test kits. However, only 2,569,181 of these kits have been distributed to people, with the HSE left with more than two million boxes – containing five tests each – sitting on shelves. The Irish Sun can reveal the Taoiseach, who was warned against widespread antigen use by NPHT, blocked the pharmacy plan amid fear in Government that garages and supermarkets would take legal action if they were excluded. In November, Health Minister Stephen Donnelly told Mr Martin in a text message exchange: "There are important short changes needed in the Covid memo regarding rapid testing. I've relayed them to Deirdre (Gillane, the Taoiseach's adviser)." In response, the Taoiseach said: "Not comfortable doing them at this stage. Talk later." Minister Donnelly then replied: "Then we won't have substantial roll out of rapid testing." A week later, Minister Donnelly planned to bring forward a memo on subsidised antigen tests and told the Taoiseach in a message: "Note on antigen tests just sent to you re subsidising." The Taoiseach replied: "Can you give me a quick call?" and the plan was later cancelled. Minister Donnelly's Cabinet memo said supermarkets and petrol stations would not be included and warned: "There is a possibility of these sectors challenging their exclusion and potential for legal challenge." An official from the Department of Trade also warned range of retailers selling these tests that providing a subsidy scheme would be "logistically and administratively very difficult". In a letter to Government officials, Assistant Secretary General of the Department of Trade Declan Hughes said that suppliers had reduced the price of antigen tests to just €2. He said that this price was expected to decrease further to €1.50 – however, prices for antigen varied significantly. He said: "We need to look at the nursing homes situation at the start and how a large number of patients were transferred from hospitals into nursing homes. But what we also need to look at is how decisions were made around spending. A lot of people are saying we need to be prepared for further pandemics and even the next national emergency... there are big questions as to how the State responded to Covid."



Text exchange... Donnelly

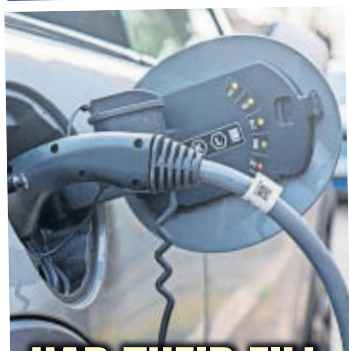
# JUST ONE IN FIVE CAN GO GREEN

## GROUND TO HALT

Minister Ryan's scheme hasn't gone as planned



Give us a fare crack at an EV



## HAD THEIR FILL

Drivers' fury at lack of EV options

EXCLUSIVE by ADAM HIGGINS  
Political Correspondent

**JUST one in five cabbies have been able to avail of a Government scheme to go green — because of a shortage of electric vehicles, The Irish Sun on Sunday can reveal.**

And the National Transport Agency is refusing to grant taxi drivers extensions for their petrol or diesel cars until they can get an electric car — forcing them to splash out on more fossil-fuel-burning motors.

One taxi man, who is stuck in limbo with the EV wait list, told The Irish Sun on Sunday that he will be forced to purchase another diesel motor instead of going electric because the NTA refuses to give drivers temporary extensions until EVs are back in stock.

Earlier this year, Transport Minister Eamon Ryan launched a €15million fund to help taxi drivers switch over to greener cars.

Under the scheme, taxi drivers are given a grant of up to €20,000 to purchase an EV and must provide proof that they have scrapped their old petrol or diesel motors.

The scheme was so popular that the NTA had to close off applications in April because so many taxi drivers applied.

However, we can reveal that just €4,013,000 of this funding has been drawn down so far.

Some 1,113 taxi drivers applied for the EV grant before it closed on April 7 because it reached its limit of applications.

However, only 185 of these drivers managed to get their funding and buy an electric car — with 27 others waiting for the money to be drawn down in the coming days.

The grant application only lasts three months, with 486 drivers applying for extensions because they were struggling to buy an EV due to the current shortage.

Despite these extensions, many of the taxi drivers missed their opportunity to buy an EV with the grant and had to reapply when the NTA reopened the scheme earlier this month.

The Irish Sun on Sunday under-

stands that more than 500 applications for the scheme have already been filed, with the grant reopened less than two weeks.

Hundreds of taxi drivers that had successfully applied for the scheme could not buy an EV in time due to problems with supply.

Many garages across the country that are selling electric cars are currently out of stock due to ongoing global supply issues — with most not back in stock until March of next year.

This has left successful applicants for the EV scheme in limbo as their grant applications are likely to run out again before they can get their hands on an electric car.

Spokesperson for the National Private Hire and Taxi Association Jim Waldron told The Irish Sun on Sunday: "This has been a major issue for a while now. There are huge delays in EVs that are suitable for

taxis. There's 5,344 drivers there and a huge percentage of them would change to EVs if the EV was available.

"Most guys are being forced to buy another diesel vehicle because they can't get their hands on an EV in time to avail of the grant.

"If a driver can prove that he has paid his deposit down on an electric car then that should be enough for them to hold the grant for them."

Laurence Kelly is a Dublin taxi

driver who is currently driving a diesel car that is due to reach its end-of-life date in January.

The Dubliner has successfully applied for the EV grant but has been unable to get his hands on an electric car because all garages are out of stock.

He told us that he has tried several suppliers who all told him that they would not be able to give him an EV until next March at the earliest.

Laurence said: "There is nothing for sale. Absolutely nothing. I've rang several garages and they said there is nothing available until March at least."

"I have asked the NTA for an extension until I can get an electric vehicle but I'm told they won't grant extensions.

"My car is going to pass its end-of-life date in January but I can't get an EV until March.

"I think that anyone whose car is ruled

roadworthy to be a taxi should get an extension until there are more EVs available.

"We can't draw down the money until we get the new cars. This is going to leave me renting a diesel for at least €160 a week, or buy a new petrol or diesel — which defeats the purpose of this grant."

Asked if the NTA would provide drivers with extensions for their current cars until they can get hold of an EV, a spokesperson said: "There is no consideration being given to amending these age-related rules now, or at any time in the future."

The NTA spokesperson added that the authority had made emergency legal provisions to extend vehicle ages during the pandemic to help drivers.

However, they said: "There are no public restrictions in place now, the economy has reopened and much-increased demand, well above pre-Covid levels, are being widely reported."

## PEOPLE POWER

Cabbie Laurence and colleagues left in lurch by electric car plan

# Taxi drivers together in Electric Dreams

## STRICKEN GOVT SCHEME'S A CAR CRASH



In short supply ... EVs

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# IRELAND'S ADDICTION CRISIS



## TRAGIC CASE

Laura died as result of addiction

EXCLUSIVE by ADAM HIGGINS and CRAIG FARRELL

**DEMAND** for a drug used to treat codeine addiction has almost quadrupled over the past five years.

But one expert told The Irish Sun on Sunday: "The codeine problem is undertreated. It's much, much bigger. I would say it's far bigger than heroin as a problem."

Codeine products Solpadeine, which also contains paracetamol, and Nurofen Plus, which is mixed with ibuprofen, are the two biggest-selling products in pharmacies here, we can reveal.

The painkillers are bought ahead of everything from Calpol to Gaviscon, Lemsip or Nicorette.

Addiction specialist Dr Garret McGovern warned: "It is a real, real problem. There are a lot of people taking over-the-counter codeine products and thinking everything is fine, and it isn't."

Codeine addicts are usually treated with either methadone or a treatment commonly referred to by the brand name Suboxone.

This drug is an incredibly effective method of treating the problem and has been on the rise since becoming part of the HSE's national drug strategy in 2017.

Figures obtained from the HSE show that 177 people were treated with Suboxone in 2018.

The number of people availing of the treatment has almost quadrupled from 177 in 2018 up to 677 as of June this year.

The drug – which can also treat other opioid addictions such as heroin – costs around €2,000 a year to treat one patient but the cost is fully covered by the HSE.

GP co-ordinator on addiction services with the HSE Dr Ide Delargy told The Irish Sun on Sunday: "I think it's fair to say that we have quite an increase in the number of people presenting with codeine addiction."

"It isn't spoken about a lot in that the people who are addicted to those medications are shopping around, for want of a better word."

"They go from pharmacy to pharmacy and buy what they need to satisfy their addiction. It is a hidden problem but it is a really concerning one."

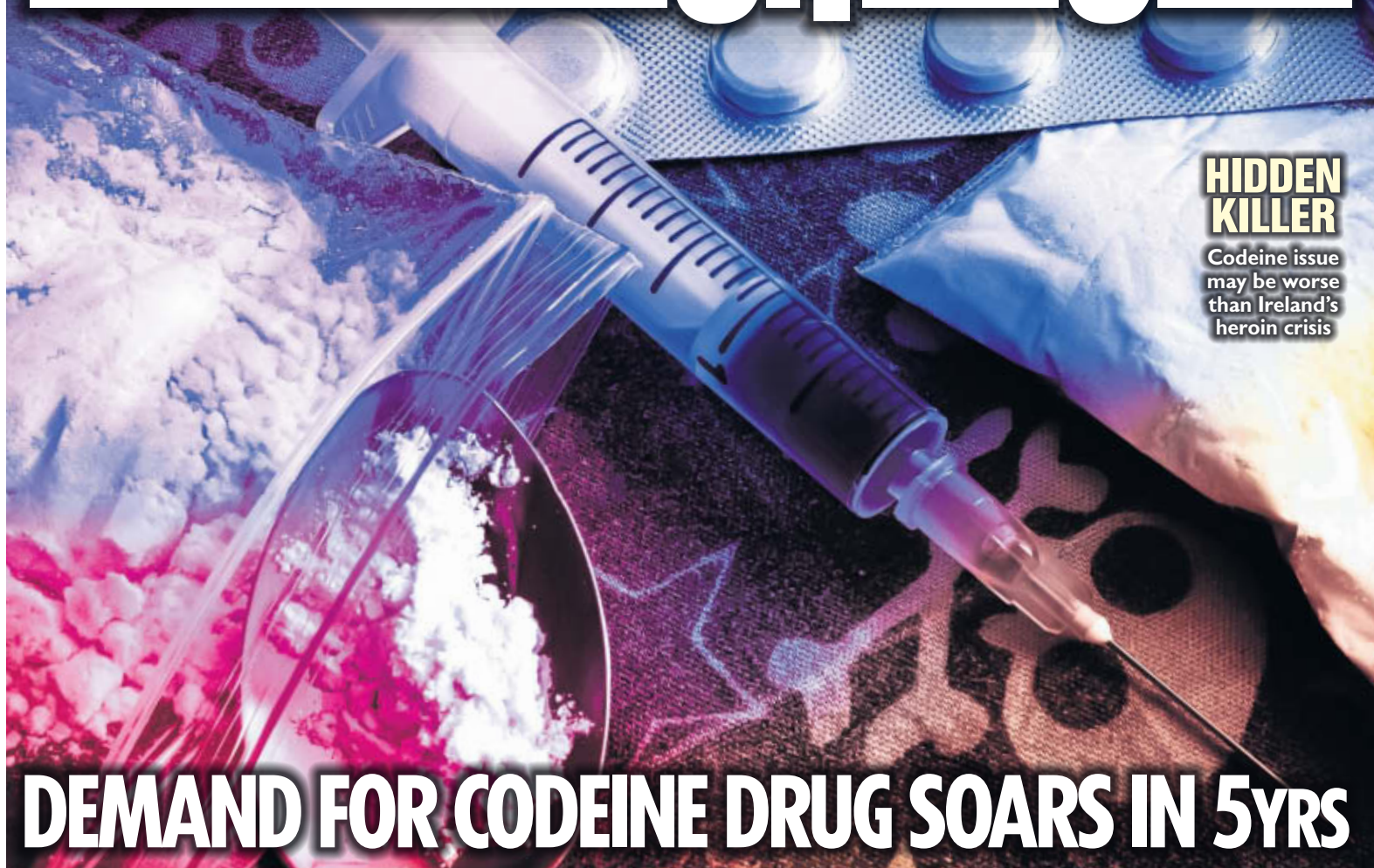
The Irish Sun on Sunday went codeine shopping in Dublin in May and picked up ten boxes of Nurofen Plus with little fuss.

But addicts can now have boxes delivered to their door with no questions asked – despite tough restrictions meaning buyers should be required to satisfy a pharmacist of their need for the drugs first.

TDs and GPs are warning of a growing wave of lucrative "click and collect" pharmacy services making it very easy for addicts to bypass these rules.

One Co Monaghan GP warned the Health Products Regulatory Authority in a letter released to us under Freedom of Information: "We had a patient presenting today taking 36 tablets per day

# Painkillers...the new drug plague



## HIDDEN KILLER

Codeine issue may be worse than Ireland's heroin crisis

## DEMAND FOR CODEINE DRUG SOARS IN 5YRS

and using multiple pharmacies to feed their habit.

"I have also been informed you can get a click and collect service to have it delivered straight to your door. To say this makes a mockery of the situation is an understatement."

"I don't believe that leaving it to the discretion of the pharmacist is appropriate as there is a financial incentive to prescribe (redacted) and therefore they are biased."

Solpadeine and Nurofen Plus are the most common over-the-counter products sold in Ireland in 2022, according to a study published in Irish Pharmacy News.

These two products have held the titles of Ireland's most popular

pharmacy products for the past five years.

And a simple online search allowed The Irish Sun on Sunday to find two prominent and long-standing pharmacies selling Nurofen Plus for click and collect or delivery in mere seconds.

Sinn Féin TD Martin Kenny warned in a letter to the HPRA, also released to us under FoI, after the death of Sligo mum Laura Newell about the "relative ease" she had buying the products.

Laura, 39, died in January after becoming addicted to painkillers containing the opioid, prompting Tanaiste Lao Varadkar to warn of Ireland's "hidden addiction".

Dozens of others have died since

2018. And experts are calling for a major information campaign around the dangers of codeine with one doctor claiming the addiction crisis could be worse than Ireland's heroin problem.

Dr McGovern told The Irish Sun on Sunday: "We have a huge problem in this country that is going very much under the radar with codeine analgesia addiction."

"We are seeing more and more of those people coming forward. We need more awareness for that because Suboxone works really well on those patients."

"I don't know the numbers on Suboxone that would be for codeine addiction but I would say it's probably the majority. The

codeine problem is undertreated. It's much, much bigger. I would say it's far bigger than heroin as a problem but I just don't have the data to back it up."

Pharmacists are required to ask questions when someone is buying these products but the HSE's Dr Delargy has admitted the current system does not stop addicts from buying the drugs.

Asked if codeine products should be put on prescription, she told us: "That is a big debate and it may be kind of a sledgehammer to crack a nut."

"There are checks and balances in place and some restrictions were put in place a number of years ago where pharmacists are obliged to question the person coming in. But I think it's fair to say that anyone with a problem is well able to circumvent those."

"They know the questions. They are going from pharmacy to pharmacy. It doesn't address the problem but I think stepping it up to make them a prescription drug is probably too excessive."

Dr Delargy added: "I think people use them without realising the risk and they just use them the same as you would use paracetamol or Panadol but they are not the same."

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Concerned... TD Kenny, left, and Dr McGovern. Above, treatment

