



EXCLUSIVE: MEDIC'S HOPE FOR SCOLIOSIS CHILDREN



Pricey . . . Children's Hospital

Fear staff put off by issues at new base

By ADAM HIGGINS

THE €2.2billion National Children's Hospital will struggle to attract staff put off by parking and accommodation issues, Dr David Moore fears.

The head of the spinal unit at Children's Health Ireland wants Crumlin Hospital to be rebuilt into housing for workers.

However, he believes the facilities at the new Dublin hospital, including 22 operating theatres, will be "second to none".

But Dr Moore warned: "The big concern is staffing. I think everyone has a concern about whether all the staff from the current hospitals will move.

"There are all sorts of issues about the costs of housing in Dublin and parking down there.

"People will say 'can't you get the Luas or Dart of bus or cycle to work' and that's fine — but not if you're coming from Meath or Kildare or Mullingar as lots of staff do.

"I think staffing would be one issue. To me that is the biggest issue.

"I would use here (Crumlin). This site. I've long ago proposed that this be used as an elective surgical centre for adults — you just need bigger beds.

"But you can build. We're on the fourth floor of the old nurses' home. Knock it down and build accommodation for the new hospital and for St James's Hospital and The Coombe — wherever they want, I don't care."

He added: "We all have anecdotal experience of listening to people say 'oh I'm not going to go to the new hospital'.

"There are some people who are really excited by it and I would be very excited about going there.

"But there are certainly a cohort of staff who say they are not sure they will go there for lots of different reasons."

The National Children's Hospital's opening date has been pushed back 14 times so far.

It's now expected to finally welcome patients at the end of next year.

The hospital's cost has spiralled to €2.2billion to date, with a series of ongoing disputes between the developer BAM and the hospital board.



OPTIMISTIC
Surgeon Dr David Moore

By **ADAM HIGGINS**
Political Correspondent

THE man charged with ending the waiting list nightmare for children in need of spinal surgery says public anger has "blown away" the resource shortages which created the mess in the first place.

However, Dr David Moore warns that a projected fall in numbers on waiting lists could go "out the window" if hospitals are hit with a hard winter.

We launched our Kids Can't Wait campaign to demand an end to the scandal of hundreds of children on waiting lists.

And in an exclusive interview, top surgeon Dr Moore told The Irish Sun: "I think the system was under resourced. There is no doubt there was a need for somebody to throw all the toys around the place and say that this is not good enough.

"I think we're getting there. I certainly wouldn't be happy to say we've done the job. We haven't. We are doing the job. We are not there yet.

"I think that we will get there but there will always be waiting lists."

Kids waiting too long for spinal surgeries for conditions like scoliosis and spina bifida has scarred the health service for years.

In 2017, then Health Minister Simon Harris vowed that no child would wait longer than four months for an operation — but this failed to happen.

'We have the ability to do more now'

In 2022, bosses at Children's Health Ireland again made this commitment to Health Minister Stephen Donnelly who allocated €19million to make this a reality.

But this plan **ALSO** failed, according to the Minister.

In response, a new dedicated spinal unit was set up, with Dr Moore asked to lead the team and finally get on top of the waiting list issue.

Sitting in Crumlin Hospital, in Dublin, after carrying out a surgery earlier that day, he outlined how a lack of resources led to these long delays for children.

Dr Moore told us: "Historically we didn't have the resources to deal with the demand.

"The demand got greater because of the population increase, patients' expectations, technology — we have the ability to do more now."

"Our non-orthopaedic colleagues have become really very good at making very sick kids fit for surgery. That kind of speaks to just how complex some of them are.

"Covid made things worse. It didn't cause the problem but it made it much worse because we weren't able to do as much surgery — like all the other disciplines."

"That was ultimately the straw that broke the camel's back."

On the day of our interview, Dr Moore had just received the green light from Health Minister Stephen Donnelly for funding for 29 more nurses and five more consultants.

He also got the OK for a new scoliosis spine register — a tool to help gather info about ops that will cost €380,000 a year alone.

And Dr Moore expects even more progress once they move



Picture: SAM BOAL/COLLINS PHOTO



Making their voices heard . . . families of children on the spinal surgery waiting list outside Leinster House in September and, left, our front page on the €19m misspent by the CHI

- NEW UNIT TO FIGHT DELAYS
- DOC GETS 34 EXTRA STAFF
- 20 SURGEONS BY NEXT YEAR

to the National Children's Hospital.

He said: "When I started here there were three orthopaedic surgeons.

"We're now at nine and by the middle of next year we'll have 12 here. Plus there will be seven if not eight in Temple Street.

"So when we move to the new hospital next year, hopefully, we will have in the low-20s — a big change from just six 15 years ago.

"It is very difficult to catch up and get ahead of it."

The stresses of working in this environment and negative media stories has taken its toll on some

healthcare staff. For over a year this newspaper has led the way in demanding action on a subject which has triggered a ferocious debate between the Government and opposition TDs.

Fed-up families and children took their protest over surgery delays to the Dail in February.

On the media coverage, he said: "By the way, perversely I think it's great. Look at the resources we've got now. We now have the ability to do our jobs better.

"It is a double-edged sword from our point of view, so thank you in

some respects."

However, the top surgeon warned that projections on plummeting waiting lists could go "out the window" if our hospitals face a difficult winter season.

The latest CHI update shows that there is a total of 259 children waiting for surgery — with this number falling slightly for the last three months in a row.

Figure from the Department of Health this week show there are 107 kids on the "active wait list". This means they are ready for surgery but have not been given a date.

Both the Health Minister and

Taoiseach have put out projected figures that this "active wait" list will drop to 87 by Christmas, while the number of kids waiting longer than four months is expected to fall to 20.

The lead surgeon admits that his team are "pressurised to give them projections" and says "if we don't meet them it won't be for the want of trying", warning that a difficult cold season would be troublesome.

Dr Moore explained: "There is lots of people now you will see with sniffles and coughs and some people get more than that.

"Kids get very sick. They come in

and might need ICU and therefore some of our more complicated patients might get cancelled because we don't have an ICU bed for them. That is a definite possibility."

Dr Moore makes a point in our interview of highlighting the needs of children with orthopaedic conditions, which he says make up the majority of the surgery cases.

Families who are waiting for these non-spinal ortho surgeries have previously told us they feel "forgotten".

But he said: "I hope they don't feel they are being forgotten because they are not. That is what most of us do.

I operate on hip dysplasia. I lengthen legs. We all have strings to our bow. They are not forgotten."

A series of issues have rocked public trust in CHI in recent years.

Asked if CHI needs to rebuild confidence, Dr Moore said: "There has been a number of things in CHI over the past two years that if I was a parent I would be suspicious of.

"I'd be saying 'wow what are those people doing'. I think we're working towards restoring confidence.

"We haven't restored it but we are working towards it."

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Pledge . . . Minister Donnelly