

## Over 152,000 Wait for Care



Professor Alan Irvine, President, IHCA

The Irish Hospital Consultants Association (IHCA) has warned that the ongoing shortage of hospital consultants across a large number of specialties in the Saolta University Health Care Group\* is restricting patients from accessing timely, high-quality medical and surgical care and is contributing massively to growing waiting lists where now more than 152,000 people in the region are waiting for hospital treatment or an outpatient appointment with a consultant.

The hospitals concerned and the respective increase in outpatient waiting lists alone include:

In total, between the period of July 2015 and July 2021, there have been an additional 53,466 people added to outpatient waiting lists, an increase of 72% with a total of 127,750 across the Saolta Group now waiting to be assessed by a hospital consultant, according to the latest available figures from the National Treatment Purchase Fund.\*\*

Some of the longest waiting lists across the whole region are for routine, planned care particularly in Orthopaedics, ENT (Otolaryngology), Urology, General Surgery, Ophthalmology, Gynaecology and Dermatology. Patients are waiting to see a consultant and then receive treatment for procedures such as hip or knee replacements, tonsillectomies, prostate biopsies, and cataract surgery, while others face similar waits for critical gynaecological assessments and skin biopsy for possible cancers.

The hospitals that have seen the greatest growth in outpatient waiting lists are Roscommon University Hospital, which has seen its list increase 3-fold (+4,307, 199%) since July 2015, and Mayo University Hospital, where there has been an additional 9,473 people added over the same period, an increase of 162%.

Of the 17,222 currently waiting for inpatient or day case treatment across the Saolta Group, 5,915 are waiting more than 12 months, a third of the total number. This is two-and-a-half times (+161%) the 2,266 patients waiting for the same length of time in July 2015. A further 7,689 people are currently awaiting a gastrointestinal (GI) endoscopy in Saolta hospitals - more than a 4-fold increase (+5,942) since 2015.

These waiting lists are likely to worsen in the coming months as more people who have put off seeking care during the pandemic enter the system, and as a result of the ongoing impact of the cyber-attack on the HSE.

Commenting on the waiting lists, IHCA President Professor Irvine said, "The severe shortage of consultants in our public hospitals is the main contributor to the unacceptable delays in providing care to patients at our regional hospitals. These growing waiting lists demonstrate the impact of years of consultant shortages and underinvestment in capacity across public hospitals in the region.

"Covid-19 and, more recently, the cyberattack have unmasked deep fundamental deficiencies in our health system which we always knew were there, but which have now been exposed in a way previously unseen.

"We have a chronic recruitment and retention crisis with 1 in 5 permanent hospital consultant posts across the country and in the Saolta Group either vacant or filled on a temporary basis.

"Meeting the healthcare needs of the 152,000 people in the West and North-West regions currently waiting to be assessed or treated by a consultant will only be possible by urgently filling vacant permanent hospital consultant posts and expanding the regions hospital beds, operating theatre and other essential hospital facilities. The success of the ongoing consultant contract discussions will be critical to the survival of our public health service for years to come."