

Mary Lou McDonald TD

Address to the Irish Hospital Consultants Association

30.09.2023

**FINAL**

Friends,

I'm delighted to be with you this morning to address your 35th annual conference.

I want to first acknowledge the work of Rob Landers, Martin Varley, Claire Boylan and everyone else involved in pulling this event together.

This is an opportunity to discuss how together we meet the challenges facing our health service today and how we can build a better future for patients and for healthcare professionals.

From the outset, let me say I am a big believer in defending and strengthening public medicine.

The pandemic demonstrated powerfully the importance of robust public health services for our society. The goal of Sinn Féin is to deliver universal healthcare and an Irish NHS within two terms of government.

We also understand that there is a place for private healthcare.

While our focus will be on building public capacity, we recognise that there is a reliance on private healthcare as well as certain embedded contractual entitlements.

We believe in identifying common ground and developing a strategic relationship to maximise our efforts to sustainably tackle waiting lists.

Sinn Féin will follow a collaborative approach to transform health services in Ireland. We want to work with healthcare professionals to deliver positive change.

Engagement, cooperation and partnership must be at the very heart of this relationship between government and healthcare.

We also know that this transformation of the health service must be planned, strategic and properly resourced in line with changing demographics and shifting population bases.

We want to replace government lethargy and backward thinking with enthusiasm, energy and a real determination to get things right.

To ensure that we make the most out of the incredible talent, skill and commitment of those who work on the frontlines of our health system.

To turn the tide of decades of underinvestment and under resourcing and the entrenched failure of government to forward plan.

A Sinn Féin led-government will be about ambition, about pace and most importantly about delivery.

Most people would agree that a health budget of €24 billion is substantial. They're right. So, we have to look at how that money is spent in order to get the best results.

Let's be clear, investment in public healthcare is absolutely essential.

Record treatment waiting lists, extraordinary emergency department waiting times are deep rooted symptoms of the chronic problem - capacity.

The very first step in delivering the health service our people deserve is building capacity.

This means giving healthcare professionals the tools you need to do the job, effectively and safely. I know from my own recent personal experience that we have the best healthcare staff in the world once you get inside the system.

The problem is too many people are locked-out of treatment and care, while the channels out of hospital care and into community care are far too slow and inadequately resourced.

So, investment priorities must also focus on improving community and primary healthcare capacity, and general practice.

Such an approach would help relieve significant pressure and bottlenecks within the hospital network.

The goal for real change in our health service must be to deliver the right care in the right place at the right time. I think that is a very simple and yet powerful principle that we can all get behind.

Our health spokesperson David Cullinane – who many of you know - has visited hospitals all across the country engaging

with clinicians and management to ensure that our plans are informed by your experience and insight.

The product of those engagements is our policy to fix the health service - a multiannual plan to deliver 1,800 additional hospital beds over the next three years and 2400 over the next five years.

Our plan is smart, responsive and agile. We will follow the data to ensure we are delivering the bed capacity that is necessary.

We know too that building capacity means investing in modern surgical theatres and diagnostic equipment across the system. This is the only way of getting patients off waiting lists and into surgery and/or treatment in a timely, safe and effective manner.

It's also very clear that you have to back-up capacity improvements with strategic workforce planning.

Such an approach is key to ensuring that our hospitals and the wider system has the people to deliver the care patients need and expect when they come through the door.

It becomes all the more important as we move to a 7-day health service, an essential step in modernisation.

A step that doesn't have to be burdensome and can instead allow for a better work-life balance if properly resourced and planned.

I know that many of you who work in our health service face incredibly challenging working conditions, and that can lead to stress and even burnout.

It shouldn't be this way. Investing in and planning for our healthcare workforce is a key pillar of the Sinn Fein strategy.

It's a no-brainer if we are serious about developing the modern, agile, responsive, world-class health service Ireland needs.

So let's pursue a joined-up approach to increasing our healthcare workforce.

Let's ensure a deeper integration, over the next decade, between higher education and the health service in order to meet anticipated needs.

Let's embrace a race to the top in healthcare education.

That means investing to increase training places across healthcare disciplines, including post-graduate and specialist areas.

It is essential that we have the required capacity within our higher education system to achieve this vision. We have to ensure that we have the talent and knowledge pipeline we require to build the healthcare workforce of the future.

So, no matter how far we've come, we must always look to go further,

always seek to expand healthcare education,

always encourage more and more young people into the healthcare professions, and expand university and college places and infrastructure.

The better future for which we strive demands that we do this on an all-Ireland basis.

The long awaited opening of the medical school at Magee University in Derry is a good start.

But we must build on this. We need real purpose now.

Friends, digital transformation must be at the heart of this modern vision for healthcare in Ireland. I don't need to tell you that the HSE is a decade behind where it needs to be in terms of IT systems. This digital deficit holds us back and impacts the delivery of care. Digital integration across health records, waiting lists and financial management is absolutely essential.

So, Sinn Féin will prioritize modernisation of digital systems so that we not only catch-up but also begin to take the lead in what is a necessary technological transformation for our health service.

Much of the public commentary about healthcare comes in chapters of crisis, dysfunction, and sometimes scandal.

Of course, that's not the full story. Far from it. People experience excellence in care and compassion in the Irish healthcare service every single day.

So, with an overarching strategy, and with everyone pulling in the same direction, we can tell a story of success, progress and achievement.



We have everything we need to build a better future where the health service can focus on delivery and outcomes instead of fire-fighting and crisis management, where patients are seen in a timely manner, and where hospitals are great places to work.

To make this happen, Sinn Féin wants to deliver a keystone agreement on Universal Healthcare.

Bringing stakeholder professions and their representatives together to mark out the measures and milestones towards Universal Healthcare.

Sláintecare provided the high-level principles and objectives for creating a national health service with universal entitlements in the south.

The Bengoa report provided solutions for modernising and improving the health service in the north.

Both focussed on delivering integrated care, ending silos, and reducing barriers.

These ambitions can allow us to dramatically improve elements of healthcare too often forced to the margins.

We must work on moving mental healthcare from the sidelines to the very centre of the system. It's especially important that we revolutionize CAMHS to integrate and develop specialist services up to the age of 25, with streamlined coordination with general adult services.

Likewise, services for people with disabilities need to be mainstreamed in the delivery of our healthcare transformation.

Investment and capacity building in independent living supports, health and social care services is absolutely essential.

I believe a health service, like wider society, can be best judged on how we look after our most vulnerable. I know everybody in this room knows that. It's time for a government that gets it too.

Friends, the course of a nation is shaped by those moments when its people come together to do great things.

When they reach beyond what they are constantly told is impossible and chart a new way forward.

When they are brave enough to want better and ambitious enough to believe that better is possible.

For far too long we have been told that delivering a new health service for Ireland is impossible. That the problems are too big, too entrenched.

Well I don't accept that, and I don't think anybody here today accepts it either.

Sinn Féin's vision is to transform and rejuvenate the health service.

To ensure that every individual on this island gets the care they need when they need it.

So, lets work together to bring that change and build an Irish National Health service for everyone.