

Serious fears expressed over future of hospital

■ Seamus Duke

Roscommon County Hospital is under more of a threat now than at any time of the past 30 years. That was the view of Hospital Action Committee councillor Paula McNamara at this week's meeting of Roscommon County Council.

Her comments came during a debate after a recent meeting between the councillors and members of the HSE held at Roscommon County Hospital. Cllr McNamara said that she was very worried about the future of the hospital in the wake of an interview given by the retiring head of the HSE Professor Brendan Drumm to RTE radio on Sunday. "He said very clearly that there were too many hospitals in counties Roscommon and Galway and that statement is very self explanatory as far as I'm concerned," she said.

Fine Gael Cllr Sean Beirne said that he was also very concerned about Professor Drumm's interview. "He is retiring with a dismal record. He and Minister Harney have caused much suffering in this country during their reign of terror. This government has been a disaster. They would prefer if we didn't exist here in Roscommon. They are only a shower of latches," he said.

FG Cllr Michael McGreal said that after the recent meeting with the HSE, he was very worried about the future of the hospital. "I have to say I was very disappointed with the meeting," he said.

HAC Cllr Valerie Byrne said that people did not realise what was happening. "There are cuts happening, all at the bottom and none at the top. There are at least 20 nurses who have left Roscommon County Hospital who have not been replaced. We have to call on the government to lift the moratorium in order to recruit front line staff, nurses and doctors," she said.

HSE request costing on sterilisation unit

HSE West has asked Roscommon County Hospital to forward a costing for a new sterilisation unit at the hospital, a fact welcomed this week by Roscommon Hospital Action Committee. HAC councillor Valerie Byrne said that the request appears to be a good sign for the hospital.

Overtime and agency staff are wasting money

Money is being wasted in Roscommon County Hospital because of the Government's moratorium on the recruitment of front-line health service staff, according to HAC councillor Valerie Byrne.

Cllr. Byrne said, "What needs to happen immediately is the lifting of the embargo on recruitment. By the end of this year Roscommon County Hospital will be down 20 nurses and as a result they will be asking people to work overtime and employ agency nurses, which is costing more. They could employ someone and it wouldn't cost as much as what is being paid out in overtime and to agency nurses."

Cllr Eugene Murphy said that he too was very worried about the future of the 24 hour A&E service and also the coronary care unit at the hospital. He said that politicians of all persuasions were doing their best to save the hospital services but that the HSE were not listening to the people.

Independent Cllr Tom Crosby said that he had been highlighting the problems in the HSE for many years. "There are hundreds of managers too many in the HSE. There is money being wasted there hand over fist. I even identified a serious situation with regard to the lack of software to support scanning equipment in Roscommon County Hospital in recent years. If that could be done by a lay person, what hope have we with the HSE," he said.

However FF Cllr Paddy Kilduff was defiant on behalf of the government. "We had Mr Alan Moran here a few years ago with big ideas and he disappeared. We have Mr Hennessy now and he will go the same way. There is far too much speculation and innuendo about the hospital and there is too much scaremongering. Fianna Fáil is the only party that has delivered for Roscommon County Hospital and that's a fact," he said. "No-one has died on the road from Roscommon to Galway," he said, "Although it seems to me that the HAC might like to see someone die on the road," he added, a comment which drew a very angry response from all councillors and the HAC councillors in particular. "Withdraw that disgraceful remark, how dare you," said Valerie Byrne and after a loud exchange Cllr Kilduff apologised to the meeting for his remark and concluded by saying, "This carry-on about the hospital is the longest playing record of all times. It's going on for 30 years. Fianna Fáil will not let Roscommon County Hospital down," he said.

Cllr Rachel Doherty (FF) stated that every politician was working hard to preserve the services at Roscommon County Hospital but that people would have to face up to the fact that if there were services at the hospital that were not being used then they would have to look at that.

Fianna Fáil councillor Cllr John Keogh said that the A&E consultant who is on call from 8 pm in Roscommon County hospital did not receive one call out in four months. "We have to work out why people are not using the hospital. We should not be talking the hospital down, we need to talk it up," he said.

Cllr Michael Mulligan of Sinn

Féin said that at the recent meeting he asked three questions concerning surgical services, A&E, and bed numbers. "I got no straight answers at all. Two fantastic spin doctors is what those guys were," he said.

Cllr Orla Leyden said that 14,000 people were using the A&E unit per year, which is a substantial figure. "There is no plan to downgrade the hospital or its services," she said.

FF Cllr Paschal Fitzmaurice said that he thought that the meeting was very positive and he said it was very good that the HSE had met with the councillors. "I hope they meet us several times in the future," he said. FG Cllr Dominic Connolly wasn't so

upbeat. "Do ye people (FF) not understand that the A&E unit will be closing down. We were told that a heart attack victim will by-pass Roscommon and Ballinasloe on their way to Galway. Are ye stupid or something?" he asked.

FF Cllr Paddy Kilduff said, "We are talking here in circles for the last hour and a half. It is as simple as this, Roscommon County Hospital will not be closing and I know what I'm talking about," he said.

Concluding the debate the Mayor Cllr Luke Flanagan said that in his opinion there was a serious threat to the future of 24 hour A&E and other services at the hospital.



Further proof of downgrading

Local TD Denis Naughten has described comments made on Sunday last by the CEO of the HSE, Prof Brendan Drumm, as "the latest proof of the HSE's intention to downgrade Roscommon Hospital".

Prof. Drumm stated that keeping four hospitals open overnight in the Roscommon/Galway area cannot be justified as the activity carried out during those hours is extremely small.

"Prof. Drumm may believe keeping our hospital open 24 hours a day cannot be justified but maybe he should try telling that

to the people whose lives have been saved by the very existence of the hospital. Perhaps he should listen to the people who told their stories at public meetings on the future of the hospital, people who were only around to do so because Roscommon Hospital was open on a 24/7 basis," stated Denis Naughten.

"Last month we heard the Minister for Health stating that Roscommon Hospital would cease to act as a stand alone facility and now the comments made by Prof Drumm are a further indication, if one



was needed, of the HSE's plans to downgrade services at Roscommon County Hospital.

"It is unthinkable that people who suffer a stroke or heart attack in the mid-

dle of the night could be forced to travel as far as UCHG, a hospital that is already struggling to cope, for treatment."

Denis Naughten continued: "The HSE has consistently indicated that it plans to relocate services from Roscommon Hospital to Galway and Prof. Drumm's comments only serve to underline this further. While the Government and the HSE will no doubt argue that any move should not be viewed as a downgrading, the reality is that the HSE is implementing the Hanly Report which re-

mains Government policy.

"We have already seen the Joint Department of Surgery between Roscommon and Portlucan shelved, with the HSE now appointing the new surgeons to Galway and Portlucan, ignoring the previous commitment between Roscommon and Portlucan. Now we have this thinly veiled threat to the future of the Hospital on a 24/7 basis.

"If the HSE is allowed to implement such a policy in Roscommon there is little doubt that it will place lives at risk."