

New Irish Pharmacy Union President Calls for New Funding Model



Tom Murray Elected President of the IPU

28 April 2024: A new funding model for Ireland's pharmacies is long overdue and needs to be implemented as a matter of priority. This was a central message from the newly elected President of the Irish Pharmacy Union (IPU) Donegal-based Tom Murray, who has worked as a community pharmacist for 23 years bringing extensive experience to his new role.

Addressing pharmacists at the National Pharmacy Conference in Athlone, which was attended by Minister for Health Stephen Donnelly, Mr Murray, while acknowledging significant momentum in efforts to expand Irish pharmacy services, emphasised the pressing need for a revised funding model. He stated that while pharmacists are optimistic about plans to expand the sector, this expansion must come in tandem with adequate funding.

"The establishment of an Expert Taskforce on the future of pharmacy was a milestone moment," Mr Murray said. The role of pharmacists will change as a result and our profession is

ready and excited to do so. These changes should include independent prescribing powers, the provision of a service for common clinical conditions and enhanced contraceptive care.

“The potential arising from all of this is immense for patient care. The expansion of pharmacy services will result in increased accessibility to healthcare, which will improve patient outcomes. Implementing a serious shortages protocol will reduce waiting times for medicines in short supply.”

Pharmacies at breaking point

However, despite the profession’s positive outlook toward this expansion Mr Murray warned that many pharmacies are at ‘breaking point’ due to the current funding model. “80% of Community Pharmacists’ time is devoted to state services in administering the community drug schemes. Last year pharmacists dispensed over 80 million medicines on behalf of the state. The fees paid for providing this vital service have been frozen for 16 years, while every other service provider, professional and employee in the Health Sector, has had increased payments.

“As a result of a draconian and regressive tiered fee structure, and in the face of rising costs, pharmacies are dispensing at a loss for significant portions of each month when providing state services. As a result, every single pharmacy is now subsidising the state through their private business. This is unsustainable and cannot continue.”

Mr Murray cited an increased administrative burden as a huge barrier to progress on any front. “Over 90% of pharmacists have reported burnout from the increased administrative burdens and red tape we face on an ongoing basis”, he noted. “Since the introduction of Healthmail we must now print an average of 78 million pieces of paper annually, the cost and time of which has been foisted upon pharmacies. We cannot wait any longer for basic IT initiatives to address this problem.”

“The IPU is calling for a reasonable dispensing flat fee structure of €6.50. After 16 years of a pay freeze this is a reasonable ask particularly considering that in 2008 the Independent Review chaired by Mr Dorgan recommended €7.50.

Concluding, Mr Murray urged the Minister for Health to deliver progress on these issues.

Successive Governments have failed to grasp the nettle and address the fundamentals necessary for patient welfare and they have flagrantly ignored the ‘discriminatory’ treatment of community pharmacists. Minister Donnelly has laid the foundations for a transformational change that could leave a very positive legacy in Irish healthcare. However, if serious reform including a fee increase is not implemented, there will be dire consequences for patient care and for pharmacy services in the future.

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