

Speech by Liz O'Donnell TD, at Heart Children Ireland Ladies Lunch in Limerick.

2nd March 2007

Good afternoon Ladies, Thank you for inviting me to speak at your annual lunch in aid of Heart Children Ireland. It's a pleasure to be in Limerick, where I grew up and was educated and always feel very much at home and among friends.

Mike Foley, your current Chairperson is a friend of long standing – going back to childhood and I was happy to accept his invitation to attend today.

Supporting children with congenital heart defects is your raison d'être with the involvement of 700 families. This year the challenge in funding terms is a Cardiac Liaison Nurse for the Mater Hospital where grown up children with congenital heart defects are seen. To date you have raised over €1m euros – congratulations to you all.

Most of the children are cared for at Our Lady's Hospital for Sick Children in Crumlin and I understand the interim Cardiology Project is at an advanced stage. I understand this and other refurbishment works at Crumlin will be completed early in 2008 – and a capital budget of €6m euros has been allocated for cardiology services at Crumlin.

This lunch today is about children. Their well being and care particularly in the context of serious illness. As I am here in Limerick I would like to take the opportunity to remember the 3 young Kelleher children and the 4 Liston children that have been left without a father following the very tragic accident in Askeaton last week-end. Many children are challenged at a very young age with bereavement, illness and sadly neglect or abuse.

We all share a desire to do what is best for sick children and this lunch today is a tangible expression of this. There is however no monopoly on wisdom as we know. This is why when we strive to achieve the best in terms of the health service we look abroad and see what has worked best and then we apply this wisdom to Ireland. This is what has been done with the new National Children's Hospital which is to be located beside the Mater hospital in Dublin.

The Report into the future strategic organization of tertiary paediatric services in line with best practice and in the best interests of children was presented to my colleague Minister for Health Mary Harney in February 2006. The report "Children's Health First" recommended that;

1. Given our population this country can support only one world class tertiary paediatric hospital. This hospital would treat very sick children from around the country. Children like the children that you are here supporting today.
2. This hospital should be in Dublin and should be co-located with a leading adult academic hospital.
3. It would also provide all the less complex hospital needs of children in the Greater Dublin area and should be supported by strategically-located urgent care centres.

All this was broadly welcomed by the medical profession, by politicians of all parties but most importantly by the parents of sick children.

A Task Group was immediately established to advise on the best location for this hospital. It invited the 6 major hospitals in Dublin to make submissions. It had extensive consultations with the 3 existing children's hospitals. There was universal support for a quick decision and a general feeling of "let's get on with this". And that is what they did. By June the recommendation was made that the location of the new hospital should be the Mater site.

Unfortunately at this point, a familiar psychology in the Irish Health Service and politics – both medical and party political kicked in. Having endorsed the recommendation to have a single world class children's hospital, some people were not happy with the location. Opposition parties called for further reviews, further delays and further prevarication. They called for the report to be turned on its head and to look at splitting the hospital in two and locating it on two sites. The insular thinking and stifling culture of political vested interest was yet again being played out and promoted over what was the right thing for children.

Thankfully, however there was a more powerful voice. The voice of the parents of sick children. They reiterated their call – "let's get on with it". How many years of deliberation did we need? 5 years? 10 years? Childhood is unique and finite. Irish children need a world class hospital and thankfully under Mary Harney's leadership, vested and political interests are being taken out of health. As she said herself, 'when politics come first, patients come last'. We've to take the local politics, the institutional politics and the medical politics out of decisions about the best health services for all the people.

- Mary Harney has now properly restated the health agenda as an agenda for patients. The new children's hospital is a patient's project.

We are now at the point where decisions are being made about the design of the hospital and on the core services to be delivered at the new hospital. Endless theorising will not deliver this hospital. Decisions will.

And that is exactly what Mary Harney has done in all her career: decisions, not dithering, and she has the results to show for it.

I would also add some wider facts that we can all be proud of. We have shown in the area of cancer care that putting all the specialists working together has delivered better results. The evidence for this is in children's cancer care.

All cancer care services for children are under the one clinical team, based in Crumlin hospital. Some of the services can be delivered in other hospitals around the country, but the clinical care plan and management is centralised under one team.

The results have been that we are now well above the European average for survival and clinical outcomes for paediatric cancer care.

We can achieve this in all other areas of complex children's care in the new Children's Hospital.

And we can also take a lot of satisfaction from the fact that waiting times for operations have been cut dramatically.

Ten years ago, 70 per cent of children who needed heart operations waited for more than a year for their treatment. Now, not one child is waiting over a year for a cardiac operation. Children are being treated in months, not years.

And the same goes for many other areas of hospital treatment. Waiting times are down from years to months. Ten years ago, three quarters of adults needing cardiac procedures waited for more than a year. Now, the norm is to receive treatment or an offer of treatment within months.

Anyone who is waiting three months can now call the National Treatment Purchase Fund and they will be offered a definite appointment. Some people decline, but the fact is that our health service is much more responsive to patients, offering definite appointments, monitoring their waiting times, responding to their needs.

There is progress in health. Good progress, real progress.

The numbers of people waiting at A&E for admission is down 40 per cent – not my figures, but those of the Irish Nurses Organisation. Waiting times are down. There are five times more home care supports for older people this year than only two years ago.

Hospitals are now cleaner, because Mary Harney started the first ever national check on hygiene in hospitals. More people can visit the GP free of charge than since the mid-1990s. She has published the first ever care standards for nursing home. And these standards will be enforced for the first time in all nursing homes, public and private.

Reform of health, or any area of government, is not easy. But I don't believe politicians should just take on the easy jobs. If there's a job to be done, let's get on with it. That's what people want. And that's what we in the Progressive Democrats have always worked to deliver – on jobs, tax, insurance, ethics and now health and justice.

Our job, in my view, is to be optimistic and confident for Ireland. Not to mope, and not to encourage moping. Our job in politics is not to ask people 'Are you happy?', but to work to get things done in government.

We have fantastic opportunities now in Ireland, so let's not throw it all away, let's get on with the new challenges and the new opportunities for Ireland in prosperity and peace.