

COPD: a battle for breath



Paul Clancy, Eddie Power, Kevin Kavanagh and Joe Smyth. Photos: Mick Wall.



Waterford COPD Support Group founding members Michael Drohan and Michael Moloney.

A NATIONAL meeting addressing a leading cause of death in Ireland will be held in Waterford next week.

COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease) is a major cause of death and disability and mainly affects those over 40 years of age.

The abbreviation refers to a collection of lung diseases including emphysema and chronic bronchitis.

Symptoms of COPD include frequent coughing or wheezing, breathlessness, and tiring easily from everyday tasks such as climbing stairs or household chores.

Those at high risk of developing COPD include any current or former smoker over 40; someone who never smoked but has a family history of COPD, emphysema or chronic bronchitis; and those with exposure to occupational or environmental pollutants.

According to the HSE, many people who develop the symptoms of COPD do not get medical help because they often dismiss their symptoms as a 'smoker's cough'.

Around 110,000 people in Ireland have been diagnosed with COPD, but it is thought that there are around 200,000 people living with the disease who have not been diagnosed.

Although COPD leads to permanent lung damage, it can be controlled.

COPD Support Ireland was established in order to support all those living with the condition.

As Ireland's first national COPD support and advocacy body, the group brings together local support groups from around the

country to help those living with or caring for somebody with COPD.

A local COPD Support Group in Waterford has been meeting since October 2011 and holds meetings twice weekly in the Edmund Rice Heritage Centre.

The group was founded by COPD sufferers Michael Drohan and Michael Moloney following a meeting of COPD sufferers who had attended an eight week pulmonary rehabilitation programme run by Martha Mackey with the support of Faye Doody in University Hospital Waterford (UHW).

The group's aims are to provide any relevant information, updates and developments regarding COPD medication and treatments; to perform various exercises designed to help the condition; and to share experiences in a relaxed atmosphere. The exercises which are undertaken help provide a better quality of life to the group's members enabling them to carry out daily tasks with greater ease.

The social element is also a crucially important feature of the COPD Support Group meetings.

Those in attendance can meet people in a similar situation to themselves, allowing them to share common experiences and advice.

"We have all made some wonderful friends since we first got together," said Chairperson of Waterford COPD Group Michael Drohan.

"Although a lot of our group also suffer other ailments such as cancer, heart problems, diabetes, etc. it's lovely to see them all heading home in joyful mood. Many say the meetings are the highlight of their week."

Michael stressed the importance of engaging in various exercises in order to help improve the quality of life of those with COPD.

"Years ago people were saying 'sit down and get your breath and don't do anything' but you need to get up and do a certain amount to keep your body active. By doing certain exercises, you can lead a fulfilled life," he said.

Michael certainly practices what he preaches and is a shining example for all other COPD sufferers.

Through his proud involvement with Waterford United, he regularly travels with the team all over the country.

"Once you're a bit active you can carry on with a good life," he said.

"People often shut themselves away because they don't have the energy to do things. COPD can't be repaired but you can prevent it from getting worse. You have to live with what you have. We hold our classes twice a week, and if anyone wants to come up and have a look at what we do or join us they would be very welcome."

Michael believes there has traditionally been a huge lack of awareness surrounding COPD.

"People have died with COPD and their families never knew what it was. A lot of farmers working in dusty sheds got COPD and passed away without knowing what it was. People just put it down as shortness of breath," he explained.

Secretary of Waterford COPD Group Paul Clancy also believes there is a huge lack of awareness surrounding COPD.

"If you ask 100 people, 99 of them won't know what COPD is. It's amazing how many people don't know about it," he said.

Paul is on two inhalers every day and must take antibiotics three days a week for the rest of his life.

"I'm on this medication just to control it. It doesn't cure it," he said.

"It's a very, very restrictive condition. I can't walk up any type of incline without being completely out of breath."

The group's members are greatly appreciative of the help they have received from the team at UHW including Dr Mark Rogan.

Last year, a COPD information and nationwide screening campaign was rolled out across Ireland in an attempt to highlight the condition.

This successful campaign involved members of the public being screened for COPD by means of pulmonary tests carried out by qualified medical volunteers.

The free mobile screening unit visited various locations including Waterford.

A campaign to have COPD included in the Long Term Illness Scheme is currently underway, and further efforts are also taking place to promote increased awareness of the condition.

COPD Support Ireland will hold a nationwide meeting hosted by the local Waterford support group in the Ramada Viking Hotel on Tuesday September 9th.

In advance of the meeting, Damien Peelo said: COPD Ireland are delighted that the local Waterford Support Group are hosting the third national gathering of COPD members. These meetings are very important for a number of reasons. Not only do people living with COPD get to meet other people from around the country, we get to hear about best practice in the delivery of services, look at common issues of concern and develop our policies and strategies for improving quality of life for people with this chronic illness."

He added: "Despite the huge prevalence of COPD in Ireland, it is not a well-recognised illness and often goes undiagnosed until later life. Local support groups play a vital role in raising awareness of the disease as well as supporting those who have COPD to get the supports and services required to live the best quality life possible."

A World COPD Day will be marked on November 19th this year.

For further information on Waterford COPD, contact Michael Drohan on 083-3579271 or email copddeise@gmail.com.