

## Coffey Defends Cath Lab Memo

Eoghan Dalton Reports

Local Senator Paudie Coffey has defended placing his political career front and centre when appealing to his Fine Gael colleague, Minister for Health Simon Harris, to approve of a modular cath lab for University Hospital Waterford (UHW). In an email to the Minister's office last March, obtained under Freedom of Information (FOI) by Ken Foxe of transparency campaign group Right to Know, the Senator asked him to consider deploying the modular cath lab while people were still awaiting the completion of the national review of cardiology services. His email continued: "If we can deliver this it would give me political cover until review [is] complete or until after an election which ever comes first."



Defending his stance: Senator Paudie Coffey.

Speaking to The Munster Express, Senator Coffey disagreed that it lent credence to repeated warnings from cardiac campaigners that Waterford's Oireachtas members have been seeking interim solutions on the issue to reduce the public tension surrounding it. "First of all, I was communicating to a political office to hammer home a political point. I was utilising that political point and I was emphasising the political impact for Fine Gael this issue is having in Waterford," he said. He pointed to the lab receiving approval in July as justification for the tactic: "Here am I, arguing the political side and trying to get members of Fine Gael to take account of the political implications the lack of 24/7 cardiac care was having. I was using a back channel that was available to me and, in fact, it proved successful." The Portlawnative, who lost his Dáil seat at the 2016 General Election, insisted the message was an attempt to remind the Minister how the party was suffering in Waterford because of its record on cardiology services at UHW.

In the email, he had attached a statement prepared by cardiac campaigner Matt Shanahan, who he described as a reasonable member of the 24/7 cardiac care campaign, detailing the case for a modular lab as a temporary measure. The documents obtained by Right to Know showed how health officials had strongly advised Minister Harris against approving a second catheterisation lab for UHW, who gave approval to a second permanent cath lab on the grounds of UHW last month. A Sunday Times report cited a series of internal health department emails which suggested officials did not believe a second cath lab at UHW was justified. Senator Coffey pointed to this as showing that the barrier on cardiology services at UHW lies with the Department of Health and not Fine Gael. "Minister Simon Harris actually overruled his officials," he added. He said it's cynical to believe Oireachtas members are focusing on their own careers ahead of the region's cardiac care.

“My father died from a heart attack in 2002 when interventional services were not available, they were available in Cork but he was too sick to travel. People have asked me how would I feel if it was one of my own – in fact, one of my own was affected. My efforts are genuine,” he continued. He said Waterford’s Oireachtas members have received regular reminders from campaigners that their seats are in danger due to their record on delivering 24/7 cardiac care, but urged people who doubted their cross-party efforts “to work with local Oireachtas members and not be divisive”.