

Five years of waiting

Since early April 2014, the personal stories associated with the lack of 24/7 cardiac care at University Hospital Waterford (UHW) have consistently been highlighted. However, the quest to obtain this crucial service continues. HALF a decade, five years, more than 1,800 days.

An enormous amount of water has passed under the bridge since deficiencies in cardiac care in Waterford were first highlighted by one of the leading campaigners on the issue.

In early April 2014, local woman Jennifer Pheasey was admitted to hospital with chest pains.

It was discovered that Jennifer had a blockage in the main blood vessel going to her heart and, as she had arrived at 4.30pm on a Friday, she was able to receive the necessary treatment.



Lone figures outside Leinster House: Mary Coughlan and Willie Doyle highlighting the deficiencies in cardiac care in Waterford outside Leinster House in 2014 at a time when the issue was receiving little attention.

However, Jennifer and her family were shocked to discover that the cath lab at University Hospital Waterford (UHW) only operates from Monday to Friday on a 9am – 5pm basis.

Jennifer's story was subsequently highlighted in The Munster Express by her father Willie Doyle who has become a stalwart of the campaign to secure 24/7 cardiac services at UHW.

Willie, from Lower Newtown in the city, has campaigned tirelessly to highlight this issue and to attract more attention to what he has consistently described as “discrimination” against the people of Waterford and the South-East.

With Mary Coughlan by his side, the enthusiastic duo have devoted countless hours and days to fighting this battle through their ‘24/7 Cardiac Cover for the South-East’ campaign group.

They have travelled throughout Waterford, the South-East and beyond in order to highlight the issue – championing the cause at a time when it was attracting very little attention and long before it appeared on the political agenda. In 2014, Willie and Mary travelled to Leinster House to highlight the issue and hand delivered a letter for then Health Minister James Reilly highlighting the inadequacies of cardiac services in the South-East.

At the time, they had collected well over 5,000 signatures calling for 24/7 cardiac services for Waterford and the South-East. These efforts were in addition to writing to the Health Minister on numerous other occasions, as well as President Michael D Higgins. Willie and Mary were also present at UHW in May 2014 when Minister Reilly was present to rename the hospital. Ironically, while campaigners stood outside highlighting the deficiencies in a crucial service within the hospital, it was being given a new name which would allegedly bring with it new and improved services. At times, throughout Willie and Mary's campaigning efforts, it must have felt as though absolutely nobody was listening. However, they remained driven and committed to the issue and were spurred on by their continued concern over Jennifer's condition.



Willie, Jennifer and Mary pictured with fellow campaigners ahead of January's march.

In January 2015, after again visiting her doctor as a result of suffering serious chest pains, Jennifer was immediately sent to UHW. However, by the time she arrived at the cardiac unit, it had closed for the weekend. As a result, she was placed in a ward for the night to be assessed and was advised that she may be transferred to Cork during the night.

Because of her acute awareness of the lack of 24/7 cardiac care in Waterford, this, unsurprisingly, caused a huge amount of distress. After her medication was altered, she was eventually discharged on Tuesday January 20th. Willie and Mary continued to campaign throughout 2015 but unfortunately kept coming up against many road blocks as their calls repeatedly fell on deaf ears.

However, the issue was catapulted onto the national agenda during the 2016 general election.

During the campaign, Willie reminded all candidates that they must live up to all of the promises made prior to polling day. He told this newspaper that the issue had "snowballed" and that they had been "overwhelmed" by the interest in the issue amongst the general public. "People are coming up to us and telling us their own personal stories. There are many others who are shocked to learn of the current operating times of the cath lab UHW," he said at the time. "We hope that this momentum and interest in the issue will remain after the election has taken place." Willie highlighted the seriousness of the issue, warning that it shouldn't become a "political football".

"This issue is above politics - it is a matter of life or death for people living in Waterford and the region," he said. "We hope that, after the general election, all politicians will remember the promises they have made. We all want 24/7 cardiac care for Waterford and the region and we hope that promises will be delivered upon." Unfortunately, the issue did become a political football - one which was kicked up and down every road. The infamous photo of Fianna Fáil politicians standing outside UHW with their party leader Micheál Martin behind a banner promising 24/7 cardiac care has been widely circulated. The photo has unsurprisingly come back to haunt the party and will no doubt be mentioned to many Fianna Fáil candidates on doorsteps throughout the constituency in the run up to May's local elections.

Subsequent negotiations on government formation saw Waterford TD John Halligan receive assurances on the UHW cardiac care issue which have failed to materialise fully.

Later that year, in September 2016, thousands took to the streets in Waterford demanding action. This was followed by major marches in Waterford in January 2017 and January 2019 as well as a march in Dublin in June 2017. There have been numerous

glimmers of hope throughout the lengthy campaign which have unfortunately been dashed. There have also been numerous controversies along the way. 'Backstop', 'transition period' and 'withdrawal agreement' are words which have dominated Brexit coverage in much the same way that 'risk register', 'catchment area' and 'mobile cath lab' have come to be associated with Waterford's cardiac care controversy.

At times, it looked as though the issue would be consumed by political wrangling.

During a PR blitz by Fine Gael in Waterford to promote 'Ireland 2040' in March 2017, Willie was disgracefully prevented from asking An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar a question at the WIT Arena in Carriganore - which perfectly showcased the contempt and apathy which the Fine Gael party has consistently shown this issue. Thankfully, human stories have remained front and centre during the campaign but this has unfortunately meant pain and suffering for many families. The tragic cases of the late Thomas Power in June 2017 and the late Una McDermott in March 2018 clearly illustrated the human cost associated with the lack of 24/7 cardiac care.

Other local people have highlighted their own personal stories including John Tobin from Tramore, David Ridgard from Kilmacthomas, Kieran O'Keeffe from Butlerstown and Jimmy Fitzgerald, from Ferrybank.

Throughout the campaign, there have been variations in the level of media coverage which the issue has received. The issue was once again highlighted in national media two weeks ago on the RTÉ Radio One 'Today with Sean O'Rourke' show when Jennifer Pheasey took to the airwaves along with Eva Creely, sister of Una McDermott, and Dr. Mark Doyle, Consultant in Emergency Medicine in UHW for 25 years. The issue has also featured extensively on RTÉ's 'Prime Time', While many people have subsequently joined the cardiac campaign, and contributed in their own way, Willie Doyle and Mary Coughlan have been constants throughout the campaign and have been selfless in their devotion to the cause. Throughout this lengthy campaign, they have conducted their campaign in a dignified manner at all times and are deserving of all the plaudits which come their way. Another march to highlight the issue is scheduled to take place in Dublin on Saturday April 13th. Some campaigners have expressed dissatisfaction at the decision to hold the march on this date, but it's worth remembering that the cardiac care issue is much bigger than any individual or individuals.

This is an issue of regional importance and the fact that the next march will take place after the fifth anniversary of Jennifer Pheasey's frightening experience is certainly appropriate.

Hopefully all campaigners, and all of Waterford and the South-East, will join with Jennifer, Willie and Mary and all campaigners in travelling to Dublin on April 13th and demanding action on this issue. Five years of waiting - enough is enough.