

MORTUARY PAPER TRAIL

Oireachtas members determined to get to bottom of controversy

Dermot Keyes & Eoghan Dalton Report

Neither University Hospital Waterford (UHW) or the South-South West Hospital Group (SSWHG) possess 'any evidence' to substantiate claims made last week in relation to the Mortuary at UHW.

The statement, issued as this newspaper went to press, followed a meeting held at UHW which was attended by five of Waterford's six Oireachtas members, where they spoke with both hospital and hospital group representatives. A subsequent meeting between Minister of State John Halligan (IA), Deputies David Cullinane (SF) and Mary Butler (FF) and Senators Paudie Coffey (FG) and Grace O'Sullivan with Consultant Pathologist, Professor Rob Landers, was ongoing as we filed this report.



A letter to SSWHG Chief Executive Gerry O'Dwyer dated October 18th, 2018, signed by Prof Landers and fellow Consultant Pathologists Dr Fergus McSweeney, Dr Nigam Shah and Dr Christine Shilling, contended that dead bodies at UHW had been left lying on "trolleys in corridors, often leaking body fluids onto the floor".

The release of the explosive letter, the contents of which were initially denied to local journalist Darren Skelton under a Freedom Of Information request (with the public interest cited in that refusal) has led to a week of intense national and local coverage of the issue. And the contentions raised by the letter's signatories, as opposed to the nature of any of the past week's considerable reportage, has led to an intense scrutiny of the October 18th document.

The deadline-making statement, also partly prompted by queries issued by The Munster Express over recent days, stated that neither UHW nor the SSWHG "has...received any complaint from any member of the public regarding the (UHW) Mortuary". However, regarding contact from bereaved families and Funeral Directors, the statement noted that UHW has "have received a query from one family. The hospital is currently engaging with the family concerned". The statement reads: "The SSWHG and University Hospital Waterford can confirm that it is not in receipt of any incident report form from any staff member in relation to the Mortuary at University Hospital Waterford. "The SSWHG and University Hospital Waterford currently have no evidence that would substantiate the claims contained in recent correspondence."

What was acknowledged at Monday's meeting, not something which will come as any great surprise, is the need to replace the current Mortuary building, which was described in the October 18th letter as "a gross affront to the dignity of the deceased and bereaved".

"The SSWHG and UHW have been fully aware of the challenge associated with the Mortuary infrastructure for some considerable time. The development of a new replacement Mortuary for UHW has been on the HSE Capital Plan since 2014 and planning permission for the proposed new Mortuary was received in 2016. In addition, efforts to resolve the matter resulted in a replacement mortuary for UHW being placed on the HSE's capital programme. Approval to proceed to Tender was received in March, 2019. The current programme for this will see the new facility being delivered within approximately two years."

The statement continues: "Last Friday (April 26th) the SSWHG confirmed the following interim and long-term arrangements in relation to the Mortuary at University Hospital Waterford: A mobile refrigerated unit will be on site, installed and available for use within one to two weeks. The short to medium term plan of a minor extension to the existing Mortuary build and an additional refrigeration Unit will be on site and available for use in 8 to 10 weeks. The long-term plan of a new Capital Mortuary build at University Hospital Waterford will be completed within two years."

The statement concludes: "University Hospital Waterford is a Hospice Friendly Hospital and wish(es) to reassure the public that all deceased patients are treated with respect and dignity."

All five attending Oireachtas members are "determined to get to the bottom of the matter" according to one parliamentary spokesperson and have urged that representatives from UHW, the SSWHG and UHW's Pathology team attend a forthcoming sitting of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health.