

UHW's Mortuary: the need for clarity

The prospect of a deceased loved one's body not being treated in a manner any family should be assured of at so traumatic a time is appalling to even contemplate. And if one bereaved family anywhere in this State has discovered that such post-mortem treatment was anything other than exemplary, then that is, without hesitation, one too many. A letter signed by four Consultant Pathologists working at University Hospital Waterford (UHW) dated October 18th 2018 to South/South West Hospital Chief Gerry O'Dwyer, contending that "most (dead) bodies (at UHW) lie on trolleys in corridors, often leaking body fluids onto the floor" is probably as shocking a disclosure as any made about UHW over the past decade. That the details of this specific letter, initially requested by journalist Darren Skelton through the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act, was denied for two reasons - due to matters specific to the long-awaited upgrade of the UHW Mortuary and that releasing such a letter would be contrary to the public interest - is difficult to fathom. Such obfuscation is a far cry from what was initially envisaged upon the creation of the FOI, an informative provision which has been chipped away at and blunted by successive governments since 1998. It does both the pursuit of investigative journalism and the public interest, ironically cited in the initial HSE refusal to divulge the October 18th letter, a gross disservice. We the people, alive or dead, deserve so much better.



A copy of this letter, also subsequently obtained by this newspaper in recent days, describes the Mortuary and Post-mortem facilities at UHW as "a gross affront to the dignity of the deceased and bereaved".

It adds: "The HSE and SSWHG simply cannot continue to endorse the operation of this service in its current infrastructure and knowingly expose staff to such risks without urgent coercive action. It is equally untenable to treat the deceased and bereaved in this appalling fashion." What has yet to be disclosed, and something which is not specified in the October 18th letter, nor in last Wednesday's 'Deise Today' interview by Dr Rob Landers (one of the letter's signatories) is how many bodies over how many years, have been left on corridors, leaking bodily fluids.

On Thursday last, Deputy David Cullinane (SF) was informed by a senior UHW official that "no risk incident forms were submitted regarding these horrific instances and that no bereaved family was ever informed of the circumstances in which their loved ones were left". It's also worth noting that the October 18th letter makes no reference to the filing of any such risk incident forms; so too the fact that any problems at the Mortuary do not appear to have made themselves known to many City & County Councillors. However, the deployment of a mobile refrigeration unit for bodies at UHW, clearly prompted by the revelations contained within the Consultants' letter, makes the refusal to initially disclose the letter under FOI even more incredulous.

Until such time as the new Mortuary is constructed and open at Ardkeen, a degree of doubt about the level of post-mortem care at UHW, something which was not in the wider public consciousness until recent days, will sadly linger. This appalling and wholly avoidable episode in our hospital's history also underlines why 24/7 cardiac care is far from the only service at UHW which needs to be urgently provided, staffed and budgeted for.