

ORDER OF MALTA COUPLE AT THE FRONTLINE OF COVID-19 RESPONSE

Dr Lisa Guthrie and her husband, Bernard, took on new roles within the Order of Malta Ambulance Corps in January and within the space of two months they found themselves in the middle of a pandemic. Based in Ballina, Co Mayo, the couple have been at the heart of the national response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Report by Deirdre O'Flynn.

A specialist registrar in University Hospital Galway (UHG), Lisa Guthrie became the Order of Malta's first female Chief Medical Officer, since the organisation was established in Ireland in 1938. Her husband Bernard, who joined the Order of Malta as a cadet aged 10, became the organisation's Assistant National Director, in charge of operations and finance.

The Order of Malta has 2,500 volunteer members in Ireland and its Ambulance Corps provides first aid and emergency medical ambulance services to an extensive array of organisations, events and festivals throughout the island of Ireland.

Members deliver training in first aid and health and safety, co-ordinate and manage community care services including day care centres, community care centres, centres for the elderly and support welfare clinics for the homeless. They also provide essential respite for disabled young people and train cadets, aged between 10 and 16 years, in basic lifesaving skills and offer them personal development opportunities.

As one of the largest providers of pre-hospital emergency care and voluntary ambulance services in Ireland, the Order of Malta is listed as a 'Voluntary Emergency Services' resource available to the Health Service Executive under the Framework for Major Emergency Management.

OPERATIONS DURING PANDEMIC

Based in Ballina, Co Mayo, Bernard and Lisa Guthrie have been at the heart of the nation's response to the Covid-19 pandemic – participating in the Order of Malta's National Covid-19 Task Force twice-weekly meetings, and also monitoring the evolution of the virus throughout the country.

At an operations level, the pandemic has impacted the organisation significantly from the top down. "Our clinical directorate in the Order of Malta had a three-year plan to standardise pharmacy orders and nursing practices and we had added a new pharmacist to the directorate," said Lisa, who



Bernard and Lisa Guthrie pictured on duty during the visit of Pope Francis to the Knock Shrine on 28 August 2018.

"The directorate met in February and we have had online video meetings since then. All members of the directorate are frontline workers, fulfilling clinical roles in their day jobs, so we have had to defer some of our plans until September or October," she noted.

Operationally, the organisation has undertaken over 1,050 duties across the island of Ireland (at the time of writing in mid-May), according to Bernard. These were all delivered in full compliance with the emergency legislation and sanitary and social distancing directives of both the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive, respectively. All of the Ambulance Corps' units co-operated closely with the emergency response programmes in both jurisdictions.

"Our 65 Ambulance Corps units were involved in transferring patients to hospitals, delivering medications, Covid-19 testing kits and specialist equipment to hospitals and clinics, and they are in daily communication with the National Director's Office at Headquarters," he added. "The units also provided ambulance support to a number of the Covid-19 Assessment Centres throughout the Dublin metropolitan region seven days a week."



Order of Malta's Chief Medical Officer demonstrates CPR during a training day for cadets.

we were able to step up. Likewise, we were able to respond when the chief pharmacist in some hospitals needed medicines delivered to vulnerable people around the country. Those vulnerable people included not just the elderly, but people living with HIV, tuberculosis and cancer."

That response also involved having a duty of care to the organisation's own members. "Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) was a huge issue and it was difficult to source," he added. "That has improved now but, when we were called in by the HSE and the Department of Justice, they provided the appropriate PPE. We made sure of that because of our duty of care to our volunteers."

CANCELLATIONS PROVE COSTLY

All of this recent activity – and everything else the organisation does – comes with a financial cost and, as with many organisations, the cancellation of events has hit the income stream of the Order of Malta.

"A lot of our major duties were postponed for big concerts and events such as the National Ploughing Championships. They're all major contributors to our charitable works, so

MULTI-AGENCY COLLABORATION

In addition, the Ambulance Corps' special Covid-19 Task Force continued to monitor the evolving situation daily and collaborated closely with the National Ambulance Service, Civil Defence, Red Cross, St John Ambulance and other voluntary para-medical humanitarian and charitable organisations.

"We issued our own Standard Operating Procedures around Covid-19," said Lisa, adding that the Order's chief practitioner is involved with the Pre-Hospital Emergency Care Council (PHECC) and was familiar with the necessary standards.

"We were flexible in adapting to Covid-19 and able to apply the practices from our clinical day jobs and replicate them for our units, for instance, in terms of protocols for taking persons to the emergency departments."

Those protocols and guidance meant that the Order of Malta was able to swing into action quite quickly, said Bernard. "For instance, the Department of Justice contacted us to help with refugees and



Lisa pictured on board the Essex & Herts Air Ambulance Charity Air Ambulance, during an observer ship day, before she starts her pre-hospital emergency medicine training in July.



The Westport Order of Malta branch marked its 75th anniversary in 2018 with a number of competitions and events on 5-6 October; Lisa and Bernard pictured at a dinner dance at the Westport Woods Hotel following the weekend's events.

that makes for a financially precarious situation that may only get worse as the year goes on. Our organisation is a voluntary effort but there is a lot of expense involved," noted Lisa.

In addition, the Order of Malta's own events have been cancelled. "Our cadet competitions in April were cancelled, our international pilgrimage to Lourdes in May was postponed, and our global Grand Master, Fra' Giacomo Dalla Torre del Tempio di Sanguinetto, died in April, so nothing stays the same," she added.

GLOBAL ASSISTANCE

That global nature of the Order of Malta was a particular benefit during the pandemic. The organisation is active in 120 countries caring for people in need through its medical, social, and humanitarian works.

"I was in touch with other chief medical officers around the world, especially Germany, sharing experiences and hearing about what was going on in their countries," noted Lisa. "On Zoom, I participated in international meetings and, from a medical point of view, Ireland held up very well in terms of our response to Covid-19."

As with everything, life goes on,

nothing stays the same, and so in July Lisa is moving to England for a year to take on additional training. "I'll be training in pre-hospital emergency medicine with the air ambulance unit in Essex

and Hertfordshire." Essex & Herts Air Ambulance Trust (EHAAT) is a Charity Air Ambulance service providing a free life-saving Helicopter Emergency Medical Service (HEMS) for the critically ill and injured of Essex, Hertfordshire and surrounding areas. She welcomes the new challenge having worked in Emergency Departments around the country as part of her training for 10 years.

RAPIDLY CHANGING SITUATION

And not surprisingly, University Hospital Galway's Emergency Department was at the centre of the response to Covid-19 in the west of Ireland. "When we were gownned up, we tried not to talk about Covid-19," she said. "Ironically, people came to work and talked about everything else, in part to get some respite from the overwhelming amount of information on the news, social media, WhatsApp groups.

"The situation was changing so rapidly in the early days – on one occasion, the protocol changed three times in the 12 hours between my work shifts. So, there was almost a cognitive overload," Lisa recalled.

Fortunately, PPE was not an issue. "In Galway, the PPE was always on point and it became second nature to us. But,



The cancellation of big concerts and events, such as the National Ploughing Championships, during the Covid-19 pandemic has hit the income stream of the Order of Malta.

initially, you had to get over the fear of seeing colleagues fully gowned up.”

PRIDE AT NATIONAL LEVEL

Now, as the country emerges from the cocoon of the pandemic, what next for the Order of Malta? “Our national conference is scheduled for November,” said Lisa.

“If we’re able to do that, we will concentrate on the fantastic effort put in this year by our volunteer members. We all helped each other and that didn’t require a particular skill set; what we needed was care and compassion to do our work.

“There’s a great sense of pride at national level and I am so proud of all our members. The pre-hospital voluntary services have given, and continue to give a huge service to the country, often without recognition.”



Lisa Guthrie pictured in Lourdes as part of the Order of Malta’s voluntary work.

ABOUT THE ORDER OF MALTA

The Order of Malta was formed in Jerusalem in 1099 and has been headquartered in Rome since 1834. Known also as the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta, it is a lay religious order of the Catholic Church.

The organisation runs medical, social, and humanitarian projects in 120 countries. Internationally, it is especially involved in helping victims of armed conflicts and natural disasters by providing medical assistance, caring for refugees, and distributing medicines and basic equipment for survival.

It has social assistance programmes to help the homeless in developed and developing countries, cares for people often pushed to society’s fringes including the disabled and elderly, provides first-aid and organises medical and social campaigns.

In 1938, the Irish organisation’s Chancellor, the Marquis Patrick MacSwiney of Marshanaglass, and Dr Charles Conor O’Malley, Professor of Ophthalmology and Otology in University College Galway, commenced the Order of Malta Ambulance Corps’ services as the organisation’s primary charitable activity.

The first unit was established in Galway and, within ten years, ambulance corps’ units were established in other Irish cities and towns, and they are continue to be actively engaged in providing emergency medical assistance to local and rural communities.

This service provided the blueprint and example for the development of similar ambulance and mobile emergency medical services elsewhere such as Malteser Hilferdienst in Germany and Malteser International. Subsequently, the organisation in Ireland expanded the range of its activities in the provision of care and support services for the disabled, elderly, marginalised and vulnerable.

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