

# RESEARCH REVEALS HEART PATIENT REHAB IN 'ABSOLUTE CRISIS'

Lifesaving rehabilitation for heart patients is in "absolute crisis" and no hospital in Ireland has a full team in place to help them recover, the Irish Heart Foundation has warned, and the charity claims that the vital service is now being treated as an 'optional add-on' in hospitals.

**T**he cardiac rehab waiting list for heart attack, stroke and heart failure patients has exceeded 2,800 – a 54% increase since 2013 – while staffing levels have plummeted by 40%.

These grim statistics were uncovered by the charity in a joint research with the Irish Association of Cardiac Rehabilitation (IACR).

"This service was considered world class in 2005, but it's now in absolute crisis," said Dr Angie Brown, the Irish Heart Foundation's Medical Director.

"HSE recruitment embargoes and chronic under-investment have stripped it bare. Nurses are being transferred to other work and are not being replaced, and even though it's an essential service, none of our hospitals have all the expertise in place to deliver high quality cardiac rehabilitation."

The research also showed that 77% of centres closed during the pandemic – most of them for over 12 weeks, despite the fact that cardiac rehabilitation (CR) reduces heart disease deaths by around 20%.

Properly-resourced CR is delivered through a dozen different disciplines, ranging from specialist nursing staff to pharmacists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, smoking cessation specialists and cardiologists. A core element is monitored exercise training, which helps patients get physically active again.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT

The Irish Heart Foundation research notes that psychological support also drives the improvements achieved by CR, but the data shows that only seven of the 35 cardiac rehabilitation centres surveyed have access to a psychologist. Twelve centres surveyed did not have a physiotherapist.

Since 2010, the number of medical directors in the programme has fallen from 38 to 21, CR co-ordinators from



*Cardiac rehab in Ireland's hospitals is in absolute crisis, despite the service reducing mortality from heart disease by 20%, says Dr Angie Brown, Irish Heart Foundation's Medical Director.*

38 to 31 and dietitians from 36 to 24. And 33 cardiac rehabilitation centres are missing four or more key staff and since 2013, cardiac specialist nurses from 11 centres were transferred to other duties.

In addition, 40% of patients are waiting at least three months for CR, when they should be starting courses weeks after hospital discharge.

One patient who knows value of the service is Dubliner Noel Flannery (52) who had seven stents inserted following a heart attack in March 2020. The father-of-two went to a "dark place", struggling to understand why it happened to him given his active lifestyle as a member of Cabra Kayak Club in Dublin.

## EIGHT-WEEK REHABILITATION

However, he was able to access pharmacists to advise him about

medication, physiotherapy, in addition to dietitians and a psychologist at a cardiac rehabilitation centre at the Mater Hospital.

"It was absolutely brilliant. It was an eight-week course, two days a week and I'm 100% behind it. It helped me to move on; they were telling me 'Noel this isn't the end, it's not your fault, you can get over it.'"

Dr Brown says the service is a lifeline for people dealing with the physical and psychological impacts of heart attacks.

"The number of patients being admitted continues to rise but staffing is down 40%. The lack of investment also creates a false economy as the failure to provide a full range of care is impacting on patients who are more likely to end up back in hospital for treatment," she added.



*Heart patient Noel Flannery who has since returned to his active lifestyle, pictured with his son Kenan in Rush beach, North Dublin.*