

Mother dies after 3 years' detention in hospital

by Fíachra Ó Cionnaith

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A MOTHER of two young children who was forcibly detained against her will in hospital for almost three years under a controversial, rarely used law has died.

The Irish Examiner understands the unnamed woman, who is from South Africa but had been living in this country for a number of years, died after a High

■ Woman was in isolation under the watch of a 24-hour security guard at a Cork city centre hospital

Court bid to release her failed.
The woman had been held in isolation in a private room under the watch of a 24-hour security guard at the Mercy University Hospital in Cork city.

This was due to fears she had a virulent multi-drug resistant form of TB that could endanger the safety of

the general population. When she refused to undergo tests to confirm this diagnosis in November 2007, hospital management physically restrained the woman — who had other health issues — under section 38 of the 1947 Health Act.

This law allows a person to be detained in hospital against their will if they have

an infection which poses a threat to others.

However, it can only be acted upon with the express permission of the Department of Health's chief medical officer and the health minister of the time.

It is understood that after repeatedly refusing to undergo tests to confirm the illness for two years, the

woman agreed to be treated last year, leading to the Health Act move being lifted.

Just months later, and almost three years after her incarceration in an isolation unit at the public hospital began, she died.

The case, revealed by the Irish Examiner in autumn 2008, was the subject of a

High Court hearing that December on the grounds the rarely used section of the 1947 Health Act was unconstitutional.

Her mother took a case against the HSE in December 2008, supported by her then solicitor Rachel O'Toole and senior counsel Marjorie Farrelly.

Judge John Edwards ruled

in favour of the HSE on the grounds that the public's right to safety overrules the individual's right to liberty.

While it remains unclear exactly how much money the HSE spent on 24-hour security and a private room for the woman throughout the three-year period, a similar case in Galway has cost the taxpayer €1.43 million.

This information was obtained by the Irish Examiner under a Freedom of Information request sent in December 2008.

A HSE official admitted in March this year that the request had been lost, before providing the information earlier this month.

No patient is currently detained against their will anywhere in Ireland under this section of the 1947 Health Act.

Bahrain doctors remain in prison

by Catherine Shanahan

A NUMBER of Irish-trained medical personnel unlawfully detained in Bahrain are not among 143 prisoners granted a royal pardon, despite pressure from Irish human rights activists.

Supporters of the detainees had hoped the pardon, which marks the beginning of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, which began yesterday, would be extended to all doctors and nurses still detained, but 10 remain imprisoned.

This is despite pressure from an eight-strong Irish delegation of doctors, politicians and human rights activists who travelled to the Middle Eastern kingdom in July. During the trip they requested that the remaining detainees at least be granted bail pending trial.

However, the request, made by the delegation to Dr Fatima Al Balushi, Bahrain's minister of human rights and social development and acting minister of health, has so far fallen on deaf ears. Dr Al Balushi said she would approach King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalif to request the prisoners' release.

Among those still detained are Dr Ali Essa Al Ekri, a fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), who trained in paediatric orthopaedic surgery at Temple Street Children's Hospital, and Dr Bassim Dhaif, also an RCSI fellow, who trained in surgery at the Mater, Temple Street and Cappagh.

His brother, Ghassan Dhaif, who trained in Ireland as a dentist, was also arrested and detained as part of a military crackdown ordered by the ruler against pro-democracy protests, part of the Arab Spring. Many of the detainees claim to have been tortured.

Writing in the Irish Examiner today, Professor Eoin O'Brien, a member of the delegation, said they had met with families of the imprisoned medics and that many felt betrayed by RCSI-Bahrain.

"Their regard for the previous minister for health, who had resigned because he had failed to protect doctors, was in contrast to their sense of betrayal by RCSI-Bahrain and the fact that none from the many representatives of both RCSI or RCPI [Royal College of Physicians in Ireland], who had visited the country recently for the graduation ceremony, had made any attempt to contact the families of imprisoned health care workers."

Both the RCSI and the RCPI have been criticised for their failure to condemn the treatment of members by the Bahraini state. The RCSI has substantial financial investments in Bahrain. Among the courses it delivers is Healthcare Ethics.

Prof O'Brien, former president of the Irish Heart Foundation and professor of molecular pharmacology in University College Dublin, said at the end of their two-day visit, the delegation "was in no doubt but that doctors had been subjected to human rights abuses".

He warned the failure of the Bahrain authorities to recognise the importance of restoring the medical profession would have far-reaching consequences, including jeopardising its bid to be part of the 2012 Formula One championship.

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FRESH THINKING



Anna Doyle helped Musgrave launch its Diploma in Fresh Food Management, the first of its kind in Ireland. Applications are being accepted for the course, which starts in September and is being run in conjunction with the Dublin Institute of Technology.

Picture: Photocall Ireland

Psych nurses to strike over staff shortages

by Jennifer Hough

STAFF shortages, bordering on what a nurse's union described as "dangerous", are affecting day services at a hospital for intellectually disabled people.

The day services for resident patients on the campus of St Ita's psychiatric hospital in north Dublin have all but ceased, it has been claimed.

The Psychiatric Nurses Association (PNA) warned it is set to proceed, this week, with "some form of industrial action" as an agreement made with the HSE concerning the hospital had not been honoured.

The campus houses mental health patients as well as 150 intellectually disabled patients. Last year, after years of campaigning, temporary staff were allocated to assist at a development, Knockmann, which houses intellectually disabled residents. They had been moved out of the old hospital building.

However, permanent contracts were not offered to the new staff and many left due to the instability of the situation, the PNA claimed.

"We are 20 staff short in the ID [intellectually disabled] service alone," a union spokesperson said.

"The HSE is fully aware of that. We had to close down school and day services at the new Knockmann centre because staff cannot cope."

The spokesman said that, due to the challenging behaviour patients display, there were a high number of staff off sick at the moment.

"In one house, four staff out of five are currently out sick because of this, so staff have had to be re-deployed from other areas."

Last year, the hospital was ordered by the Mental

Health Commission to cease all acute admissions due to the condition of the building. The deadline is August 31 but the HSE has not announced where patients will be admitted instead.

"We are trying to save the health services for this region. This is Minister Reilly's constituency yet it seems nothing is being done. It is very unfair for the people who are in these services because they are not getting the care they should be. We cannot even get agency staff at the moment. Patient care is being compromised."

A spokesperson for the Mental Health Commission said it expects the HSE to meet the condition to permanently close the acute admission units by August 31.

"That deadline is now approaching and... we fully expect that it will be met."

"It is important to recall why these conditions were imposed in the first place. For several years the reports of the Inspector of Mental Health Services have said that St Ita's Hospital is unfit for purpose. The 2009 report described St Ita's as "dilapidated, desolate and depressing".

"It is more than two years since that report was published and over a year since the commission imposed conditions on St Ita's."

"The HSE has been given more than adequate time to put in place the necessary changes needed to provide a satisfactory service. The commission has been very flexible and last February extended to the HSE an extra six months to fulfil the conditions."

"Our priorities are the patients, and improving the standards and conditions in mental health services so that people receive the best care and treatment in the most appropriate settings."

Transplant patient voices fears over health service cuts

by Paddy Clancy

THE country's oldest transplant patient, Brendan McLaughlin, admitted he is "frightened as hell" he may die if he ever has to seek urgent hospital treatment.

He launched a blistering attack on diminishing health services which could mean a longer ambulance journey in event of an emergency.

Cystic fibrosis sufferer Mr McLaughlin, 43, said reducing services in local hospitals and plans to close some of them will mean longer ambulance drives to busy casualty units at other hospitals well away from their homes for patients like him in an emergency.

Mr McLaughlin, a lung and kidney transplant patient and chairperson of the Donegal branch of the Cystic Fibrosis Association, wrote a pleading letter two months ago to Health Minister Dr James to stop further cutbacks.

He said: "I got a two-line reply from his office saying that the minister was looking into it. They haven't written since but we continue to hear about further hospital units closing."

Many local hospitals, like his own, Letterkenny General Hospital, feared emergency units would be closed at specific times, opening only during daylight hours.

He added: "Anybody



Brendan McLaughlin: Ireland's oldest transplant patient fears hospital cutbacks.

Picture: James Connolly

who is unfortunate enough to require medical assistance outside the prescribed hours are likely to find themselves in the back of an ambulance on their way to a very busy casualty unit at a hospital well away from where they live.

"A patient may die while being forced to make such a stupid journey. For those with cystic fibrosis, the implications are grave.

Infections may be left much longer, before being treated.

"That's something which frightens the hell out of me."

Mr McLaughlin is cared for by his elderly mother Frances at their home in Stranorlar, Co Donegal.

Mr McLaughlin has survived a double lung-transplant for 19 years. He also survived a successful kidney transplant.

Nanoparticles in everyday items harmful for hearts

by John von Radowitz

TINY "nanoparticles" found in diesel fumes and a host of everyday products, ranging from cosmetics to paint, have direct and potentially dangerous effects on the heart, a study has shown.

An experiment by German scientists confirmed certain small-scale chemical particles can increase heart rate, upset heart rhythms and interfere with the heart's electrical activity.

Professor Reinhard Niessner's team used an isolated rodent heart flushed with artificial blood to test for effects on heart function.

Although the doses were around 100 times greater than those experienced in the real world, the findings provide clear biological evidence for the first time of what common nanoparticles

can do to the heart.

"There's lots of ongoing research into the toxicology of nanoparticles, but so far people have only carried out tests on cells," said Prof Niessner, from Munich Technical University. "This is the first hint from a higher organ level of what may happen."

He added: "It might explain why so many people died in the London smog."

More than 12,000 people may have had their lives cut short by the Great Smog in December 1952, when airborne pollutants mostly from burning coal choked the city.

The test bed heart, known as a Langendorff heart, was exposed to a range of different nanoparticles. They included titanium dioxide, spark-generated carbon — a model for diesel pollutants — carbon black, and silicon

dioxide. In addition, aerosol silicas that act as thickening agents in cosmetics and polystyrene nanoparticles were tested.

The findings were published today in the journal ACS Nano.

Carbon black, spark-generated carbon, titanium dioxide and silicon dioxide all produced a 15% increase in heart rate, along with altered electrocardiogram values which did not normalise after exposure was ended.

The research suggests that nanoparticles stimulate the release of noradrenaline, a nerve signalling chemical, from nerve endings in the inner wall of the heart.

Noradrenaline increases heart rate and also plays an important role in the central nervous system, suggesting that nanoparticles might also affect the brain.

Aid agency helps 500,000 people in famine-hit Horn of Africa

by Sarah Stack

AID from an Irish humanitarian agency has reached more than half a million people stricken by famine in the Horn of Africa.

Concern Worldwide revealed it has already helped 200,000 people in Somalia, 260,000 in Ethiopia and 100,000 in Kenya.

Public donations to Concern have already topped

€2.6 million, with an estimated €2m also going to Trócaire.

Chief executive Tom Arnold said: "We are working 24/7 to scale up what we are doing to meet the challenges of this catastrophe."

"Having just returned from the region, I can testify that reaching half a million people is a significant achievement given the very

difficult circumstances."

Aid agencies say the region's drought is one of the worst in years, affecting up to 12 million people.

Thousands of Somali refugees are flooding into camps in Ethiopia and Kenya in search of food after months without rain decimated livestock and killed crops in their homeland.

The Government, which has provided almost €7m in

aid, has sent a shipment of shelter materials, cooking utensils and mosquito nets to Concern in Mogadishu, Somalia.

The charity is also running emergency feeding programmes in all three countries, as well as water and sanitation projects.

"The Irish public have once again been outstanding in contributing significantly to our response to this crisis

and we'd like to thank them for that," Mr Arnold said.

"But we'd also urge people to keep supporting us, as this crisis is not going away any time soon."

"At this point in time, it is clear that we still want to reach more people."

● To donate call 1850 410 510 or visit online at concern.net/drought.

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Children at Banadir hospital in Mogadishu, Somalia, which is in the grip of famine.

Picture: AP/Farah Abdi Warsameh