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IAEM Survey confirms ongoing severe ED staffing difficulties

The Irish Association for Emergency Medicine has just completed a survey of medical staffing in the Emergency Departments (EDs) of the 31 hospitals with 24 hour ED facilities. The survey shows significant staffing shortages, with only 13 hospitals, including the 3 Dublin Paediatric Emergency Departments, reporting being staffed to their approved ED medical complement. Of the 161 Registrar (middle grade) posts nationally, 140 are filled, leaving 21 unfilled posts (a 13% vacancy rate). Of the 200 Senior House Officer posts nationally, 177 are filled and 23 unfilled, representing a vacancy rate of 11.5%.

Unfortunately, the paucity of Consultants in Emergency Medicine nationally (there are currently 58 substantive Consultants spread throughout 31 hospitals) means that Irish EDs are overly dependent on junior doctors, particularly doctors in the SHO grade. The current shortages mean that either certain shifts are left uncovered or departments are reliant on locum doctors. Such short-term locums are unlikely to be able to provide the same standard of care as doctors in substantive posts who have been provided with appropriate induction, ongoing training integration into the ED team in the particular department in which they work. Such recruitment difficulties inevitably lead to longer delays for patients and a demonstrable fall in clinical standards.

The staffing deficits are most evident in the following hospitals: Our Lady's Hospital, Navan (80% vacancy rate); Kerry General Hospital, Tralee (66% vacancy rate); Midland Regional Hospital, Portlaoise, Letterkenny General Hospital (50% vacancy rate each); Mid Western Regional Hospital, Limerick (33% vacancy rate), Mercy University Hospital, Cork (30% vacancy rate); Mayo General Hospital, Castlebar (28% vacancy rate); Sligo General Hospital, Wexford General Hospital (25% vacancy rate each); Midland Regional Hospital, Mullingar (22%); Cork University Hospital (18% vacancy rate) and Portiuncula Hospital, Ballinasloe (16% vacancy rate).

Other hospitals that are short staffed are: Cavan General Hospital; South Tipperary General Hospital, Clonmel; Waterford Regional Hospital; Midland Regional Hospital, Tullamore; Mater Misericordiae University Hospital and Galway University Hospital.

Of concern, is the increasing likelihood of the situation being even worse after the next changeover of junior medical staff in January 2011. Those who are currently recruiting have noted a significant fall off in the number of applicants for posts even to those hospitals which have not traditionally experienced recruitment difficulties. This issue needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. We must move away from the model where EDs are for the most part staffed by junior doctors who rotate every six months. The solution is the appointment of permanent fully trained doctors. This will require significant Consultant expansion and the development of a new grade of doctor, the Associate Emergency Physician as previously proposed by IAEM in its paper Staffing Needs for Emergency Departments in Ireland.

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