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Avoiding addressing the capacity problem will condemn more patients to languishing on trolleys

This week we learned that the National Neurosurgical Unit at Beaumont Hospital is unable to meet the demand for urgent surgery for patients with malignant brain tumours. This news comes at the same time there is an on-going daily struggle to have patients with significant brain injury needing emergency neurosurgical intervention admitted to Beaumont in a timely fashion.

As things stand there are well documented shortages of acute hospital beds, community beds and critical care beds across the country and large numbers remain warehoused on Emergency Department (ED) trollies on a daily basis. It is rather surprising to hear talk about winter planning as if the problems in the health service are exclusively a winter phenomenon or can just be addressed in an *ad hoc* way. While certain contributors to the problem certainly worsen over the winter, the very dangerous phenomena of patients languishing on trolleys and repeated cancellations of elective surgery are a year round problem. It is important therefore that the identified problems are addressed continually rather than occasionally.

This week the Irish Medical Organisation added its voice to the chorus of concerns about the shortage of acute hospital beds and directly linked ED crowding with admitted inpatients to the shortage of acute hospital capacity. Over the past decade IAEM has repeatedly brought this issue to public attention and at this stage is forced to ask how many more expert bodies will have to speak on this issue and make the same point before there is a concerted attempt to address the underlying capacity problem?

The Association fully recognises that investing in capacity is expensive, both from the capital expenditure and staffing perspectives however if we wish to achieve even the most basic requirement that a patient who requires hospital admission as an emergency is able to get a hospital bed in a timely fashion and doesn't suffer the heightened risk of death or a worse medical outcome from languishing on a trolley then this nettle needs to be finally grasped. This issue has been talked to death at this stage – the Minister for Health and the HSE need to finally set about solving it. Episodic allocations of funding will not solve the underlying problem, only increased bed capacity will.

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