

COVID-19 highlights need for more Medical Scientists in Hospitals

Ireland needs an Integrated Laboratory Information System

There is an urgent need for more Medical Scientists working in hospitals, as all hospital laboratories face serious recruitment and retention challenges.

There is also a need to progress a long-awaited single Laboratory Information System and National Individual Health Identifier.

Speaking at the Academy of Clinical Science and Laboratory Medicine's AGM today, President Dr Brigid Lucey highlighted the need to invest in Medical Scientists and hospital laboratory infrastructure.

"Laboratories are constantly fire-fighting and the demands of COVID-19 demonstrated the lack of investment. The pandemic shows that the required expertise is available in Medical Scientists, but capacity and infrastructure are sadly lacking. Laboratories account for 5% of the hospital budget, yet laboratory results inform 70% of clinical decisions.

"Medical Scientists must be part of an immediate planning process with the HSE and should have a formal link and access to the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). They understand the entire testing pathway and the need for quality management across the continuum of patient care."

The calls were also made as part of a joint submission to the Oireachtas Special Committee on COVID-19 by the Academy of Clinical Science and Laboratory Medicine (Academy) and the Medical Laboratory Scientists Association (MLSA).

MLSA General Secretary Terry Casey supported the position: "The pandemic has demonstrated how much Ireland requires the expertise of Medical Scientists to respond quickly to public health issues. There are serious staffing shortages and retention challenges across all Irish hospital laboratories. Ireland lags well behind our European counterparts in terms of relative numbers of Medical Scientists.

"The government, Department of Health, HSE and NPHE have spoken throughout the pandemic of the importance of testing and being led by science. It is now time to review and plan Irish laboratory services for ongoing COVID-19 testing, for a probable second wave and for the demands of routine and emergency hospital laboratory activities," he said.

Dr Lucey also said that the lack of IT connectivity in terms of laboratory diagnostics must be addressed.

"Ireland needs investment in health system IT connectivity to fast-track ordering of tests, return of results and integrated patient care. Delivery of a long-awaited single Laboratory Information System is key to improved co-ordination of testing, integration of patient care and collation of statistical and epidemiological information.

"Never has the need for an integrated IT system been more evident than during the current pandemic. Results were recorded on different systems throughout the country, making collation of data extremely difficult. COVID-19 patients presenting to hospital having been tested in the community needed to be tested again because clinicians in hospitals had no access to their results. Also, GPs had no way of tracking samples through the testing system.

"Laboratory systems need to integrate to provide a full patient history to all clinicians and a link between primary care and the acute hospital settings, both public and private. The Sláintecare Health Strategy recognises these developments as necessary.

“These systems should be accompanied with an Individual Health Identifier (IHI) for all citizens eliminating duplication of testing, analysis and reporting,” she said.

There are approximately 2,500 medical scientists employed in Ireland in public hospital laboratories and private hospitals.

Further Information

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Academy of Clinical Science and Laboratory Medicine

The Academy of Clinical Science and Laboratory Medicine (Academy) is the professional body representing Medical Scientists in Ireland. Its vision is to support excellence in clinical science and laboratory medicine, and in doing so, enhance patient outcomes. www.acslm.ie