

6 CORONAVIRUS CRISIS



Viktoria Jurek, with mum Alzbeta, has waited over four years

'We've been waiting for years' – painful wait for spine ops made worse by virus

Eilish O'Regan

GROWING numbers of children suffering from scoliosis, the painful and disabling spinal condition, are enduring distress after vital surgeries were cancelled in recent months due to the Covid-19 crisis.

Figures show that 107 children are now on the waiting list for an operation to straighten their spine, with some suffering deterioration due to the delay.

The majority are patients at Crumlin Hospital while 21 are in treatment in Temple Street.

"We have witnessed an increase in the number of parents contacting us fearful and upset regarding their children's waiting times for scoliosis care," said Claire Cahill, of the Scoliosis Advocacy Network.

SPECIALIST

"Scoliosis is a time-sensitive condition. Long waits for surgery can result in reduced outcomes and higher risks to children."

She said parents accepted that no surgeries or specialist clinics took place during the worst of the Covid-19 spread but "children still require care and treatment".

The last government promised no child would wait longer than four months for surgery but this has been breached.

One of the young patients caught up in delays is 18-year-old Viktoria Jurek, from Norwood in Waterford city, who has been waiting more than four

years for surgery.

Viktoria, whose family is originally from Slovakia, has been attending Temple Street Children's Hospital in Dublin for years and was eventually due to have surgery at the end of 2019.

"She had no capacity in her lungs any more. We have been waiting for the surgery for years. Since December we are no clearer on when the operation will go ahead," her father Joseph said.

He said Viktoria, who is confined to a wheelchair, now has very severe scoliosis and the longer the surgery is delayed the more difficult the operation will be.

Her family is now pleading with doctors to set a date for the surgery and end the limbo of uncertainty which is leaving Viktoria struggling daily.

A spokesman for Children's Health Ireland (CHI), overseeing Temple Street and the other children's hospitals, said he could not comment on individual cases.

"CHI sincerely regret that children and their families are experiencing long waiting times for their appointments," he said.

"While the majority of children are seen within a 12-month period, we recognise that too many are waiting too long for their appointments and we are making every effort to reduce these waiting times."

He said Covid-19 the hospitals to defer all non-emergency spinal operations but they are now planning to "phase up services on an incremental basis".

OFFENCE NOT TO TRANSPORT, BUT

Eilish O'Regan

COMMUTERS risk a €2,500 fine or six months in jail for not wearing a face mask on public transport from today – but the new law is mired in confusion over how it will be enforced.

It is now an offence not to wear a face mask on a bus or train in a bid to curb the spread of Covid-19.

However, the National Transport Authority (NTA) could not say who would be designated to enforce the rule at busy railway stations.

Bus drivers have been told by their union they are not compelled to take on the role of demanding the public's compliance.

The lack of clarity over how it will be implemented is expected to lead to widespread flouting of the law.

HIGHER

The news comes amid concern as the number of new daily cases of the virus remains higher than in recent weeks, with another 17 people diagnosed with the infection yesterday.

It means that in the space of just four days, 90 new cases of the virus have been detected, as the impact of travel-related infection and virus spread among young people enjoying house parties and pre-Covid-style socialising takes hold.

The Department of Health, which brought in the new mandatory face mask regulations, signed off by Health Minister Stephen Donnelly, referred all queries on enforcement to the Department of Transport yesterday.

Earlier, Dermot O'Leary, of the National Bus and Rail workers' Union (NBRU), said:



"Frontline workers should not be put in a position of potential confrontation with passengers.

"We support the wearing of masks, but it has been introduced without consulting with us.

"It is distasteful that pressure is now put on workers who were at the centre of supporting the public during lockdown.

"A bus driver was killed in France when he got into an altercation with a passenger over the wearing of a mask and we don't want that to happen here."

The NTA said the regulations allow for "any officer, employee or agent" to enforce the law, but could not say what would happen if someone bought a rail ticket at Heuston Station today and did not wear a mask.

The Department of Transport, in response to questions, said last night that the Department of Health was the lead agency for Covid-19-related

regulations and public health guidelines.

"In circumstances where a non-compliant passenger, without reasonable excuse, fails to accept the refusal or comply with a relevant person's request, members of An Garda Síochána may be called to assist," it said.

"An Garda Síochána will continue its graduated policing response based on its tradition of policing by consent.

"This has seen gardai engage, educate, encourage and, as a last resort, enforce. That approach will continue in as-

'Workers should not be put in a position of potential confrontation'

sisting the enforcement of these regulations.

"Where potential breaches of the public health regulations are identified, and where a person does not come into compliance with the regulations, a file will be submitted to the Director of Public Prosecutions."

Under the regulations, people are exempt from wearing a mask if they have a reasonable excuse, such as where they cannot put one on, wear or remove a face covering because of any physical or mental illness, impairment or disability, or without severe distress.

DEMAND

A transport employee can refuse to admit a person without a face covering

on to a bus or train. They can also demand that a passenger remove themselves if they are found not to be complying.

Before this happens, they have to give the passengers an opportunity to "provide a reasonable excuse" for not wearing a mask.

Meanwhile, a new poll today shows that almost three in four people are likely to get a Covid-19 vaccine if one is found.

The Ipsos MRBI for the Irish Pharmaceutical Healthcare Association showed 52pc were very likely to get a Covid-19 vaccine, while 21pc were fairly likely. Almost one-fifth, or 17pc, were unlikely to get the vaccine, while 10pc were unsure.

Over four-fifths, or 81pc, of people believe a Covid-19 vaccine will be found. However, most of those – 62pc – believe it will be next year before one is available to the public. Just 11pc believe a Covid-19 vaccine will be available this year.

Labour Court faces 'tsunami' of cases as



The Labour Court may have many decisions to make

Fiona Dillon

THE Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) could be facing a "tsunami" of cases down the line as the repercussions of Covid-19 on jobs and salaries hit home.

Businesses may be reopening after the lockdown, but not all employees are being offered their job back on the same terms, with pay cuts and hours being reduced causing major concerns for many.

Employment law expert Richard Grogan said that Covid-19 means "we are in uncharted territory" at the moment.

"We are getting a lot of issues from both employers and employees," he said.

"The starting point for any query is: 'Can we look at the contract?' That will determine the rights and obligations of both employees and employers are. The reality of it is a lot of employees do not have properly drafted contracts.

"To a certain extent we are in uncharted territory until businesses get back up and running.

"But that period will create a tsunami of cases to the Workplace Relations Commission."

He believed that this in turn will lead to a tsunami of appeals

to the Labour Court, where people will appeal the adjudications made in their personal case in the WRC.

PAYOUTS

Mr Grogan stressed it is important that advice is sought by both sides, as an employee who does not follow correct procedures can be left without redundancy entitlements and employers may face large payouts.

He said that for employees: "If you are called back on reduced hours, get advice from your union or employment law solicitor."