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THE IRISH NEWS

Cancer patient left lying on hospital floor for 50 hours describes ‘turmoil’ at emergency department

“The experience has been a real eye opener to the reality of the situation facing the health service”

By Conor Coyle

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A Co Fermanagh man with Stage 4 cancer was left lying on the floor of Altnagelvin Hospital for more than 50 hours.

Ernie Irvine has described the “turmoil” of the emergency department as the pressure continues to mount on the health service.

The 55-year-old, from Kesh, has been battling the illness for the last two years, and presented to the ED at the Derry hospital last Sunday with abdominal pain.



Ernie Irvine spoke to the Irish News about his experience at Altnagelvin Hospital

While his pains were later found to be related to an obstruction in his bowel, which was not connected to his cancer, Mr Irvine required an operation and was finally given a bed last Tuesday evening.

He continues to recover in hospital and now says he is being well looked after, but described how he received an IV drip and treatment while he waited on the floor for more than two days.

The Western Health and Social Care Trust has highlighted the “extreme pressures” it faces at its emergency departments in Altnagelvin and the South West Acute Hospital, while the health minister has acknowledged a new ED for the Derry hospital may be years away, despite it being the oldest of the Type 1 EDs in the north.

Speaking to the Irish News from Altnagelvin, Mr Irvine described the “turmoil” that met him at the ED.

“I was due my second session of chemotherapy on Thursday, but unfortunately, I started taking pains in my stomach last Sunday morning,” he said.

“Based on what was happening, they told me it was a bit of a red flag due to my age and illness, and to go to A&E.

“Two paramedics landed to my house, and the protocol was because I was over 55 and had lower abdominal pain, I had to go straight to Derry.

“I was wheeled in on a trolley and stared at the ceiling for a few hours, then I moved on to a hard seat. They were treating me from what was as good as a park bench.

“The place was in turmoil, it was unreal. I started to realise I was there for the long haul.

“I was cornered between the toilet and a room where they were dealing with people with mental health issues.

“Eventually, I got a scan and got brought back to the seat again, four or five hours later I went for an X-ray and was brought back again.

“Eventually, I couldn’t sit any longer, and there was an older man there who needed the seat more than I did, so I just lay on the floor then. A family member brought me a blanket and pillows.

“That’s where I was receiving my treatment, receiving my IV.”

In a vulnerable state due to his illness, Mr Irvine said he worried for his health due to the conditions he was faced with.

“With my illness I’m immunocompromised, if I got any sort of sepsis or infection it could be disastrous. There was a man beside me getting tested for Covid and they were coming in with all sorts of ailments.

“You couldn’t have put me in a worse place. I didn’t fight my case, I wasn’t going to get up and start roaring around the corridor. I looked around me and the state people were in and thought, what was the point?”

“We were all in the same boat and I didn’t think it would have done anyone any good to start kicking up a fuss.”

Thankfully, after being admitted last Tuesday evening and receiving his surgery, Mr Irvine remains in hospital and hopes to return home in the coming days.

He says his story and those of others in the hospital should serve as a wake-up call to those in charge of the health service.

“The experience has been a real eye-opener to the reality of the situation facing the health service,” he said.

“I don’t want to be a martyr, there were plenty of other people in the hospital who were struggling, not just me. Something needs to be done.”

The Irish News understands following the submission of a complaint to the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority, inspectors have visited Altnagelvin in the last week to assess the care being given to patients there.

A spokesperson for the Western Trust said both of its acute hospital sites were “over capacity” and had introduced 41 “escalated beds” over and above the 370 funded beds at Altnagelvin.

“Pressures are not unique to the Western Trust area and are being experienced across Northern Ireland,” the health trust said.

“We are working alongside the Regional Control Centre daily to manage pressures. Unfortunately, due to these extreme pressures, patients waiting for admission to a ward are having to wait longer in our Emergency Departments than we would like, and we apologise for this.



Eirias Irvine described the extreme pressures faced in Altnagelvin ED last week

“We want to reassure the public that we are doing the best that we can and wish to thank our staff for the excellent care they provide to our patients under difficult circumstances.”

A spokesperson for the RQIA confirmed it had conducted inspections at both acute hospitals in the Western Trust area last week.

“While RQIA do not investigate individual ‘complaints’, we do capture information and intelligence from those concerns that inform future regulatory work, including inspections,” a spokesperson said.

“RQIA can confirm an inspection was undertaken in the Western Health and Social Care Trust last week. Altnagelvin Hospital was inspected on 12 November and the South West Acute Hospital on 13 November. In due course, a report from that inspection will be made publicly available.”

Responding to The Irish News, the Department of Health admitted the Altnagelvin ED upgrade is “currently unaffordable”.

Health Minister Mike Nesbitt added: “I’m determined to reduce waiting times in our Emergency Departments and improve the experience for patients across Northern Ireland. My long-term vision involves diverting patients to the most appropriate care pathways first time, to provide patients with the best care possible. This includes an increase in the number of same day care clinics, to ensure patients avoid unnecessary attendance at the ED, and strengthening community services like Hospital at Home, making sure people get the right care, in the right place, first time. I recognise that current waiting times are far too long, but there is no quick fix. I am committed to lasting improvement — backed by sustained effort, long-term funding, and support right across the political spectrum.”

A Department of Health spokesperson added: “Western Health & Social Care Trust submitted an Outline Business Case in 2020 for the redevelopment of the Emergency Department. The Trust is currently working on updating its Outline Business Case to ensure the proposed solution will be fit for purpose, state of the art and sized to accommodate the numbers presenting in the future.

“It is important to ensure the proposed solution will deliver the benefits needed and represent value for money. The Department’s ability to take forward the redevelopment of the Emergency Department will be dependent on the capital budget allocation we receive and, given the need to fund contractual commitments and ongoing investment to maintain existing services, is currently unaffordable based on the level of funding indicated in the Draft capital budget for 2025/26.

“When funding becomes available for the redevelopment of the Emergency Department at Altnagelvin, the Trust will be invited to submit a business case for this proposal.”

