



## FREE INSIDE

### Delicious Fast800 recipe pullout

Shape up with Dr Michael Mosley

University spent €200,000 on entertaining and upgrading president's residence over three years +++ Call for PAC to question costs

# COLLEGE CHIEF'S €4,000 ON BED LINEN

THE University of Limerick spent almost €4,000 on linen bedding for its outgoing president's multi-million euro house on campus, the Mail can reveal.

And that was only part of more than €200,000 paid out by the

#### EXCLUSIVE

By Lisa O'Donnell

cash-strapped college for entertainment and upgrading at the residence, when ex-president Dr Des Fitzgerald lived there.

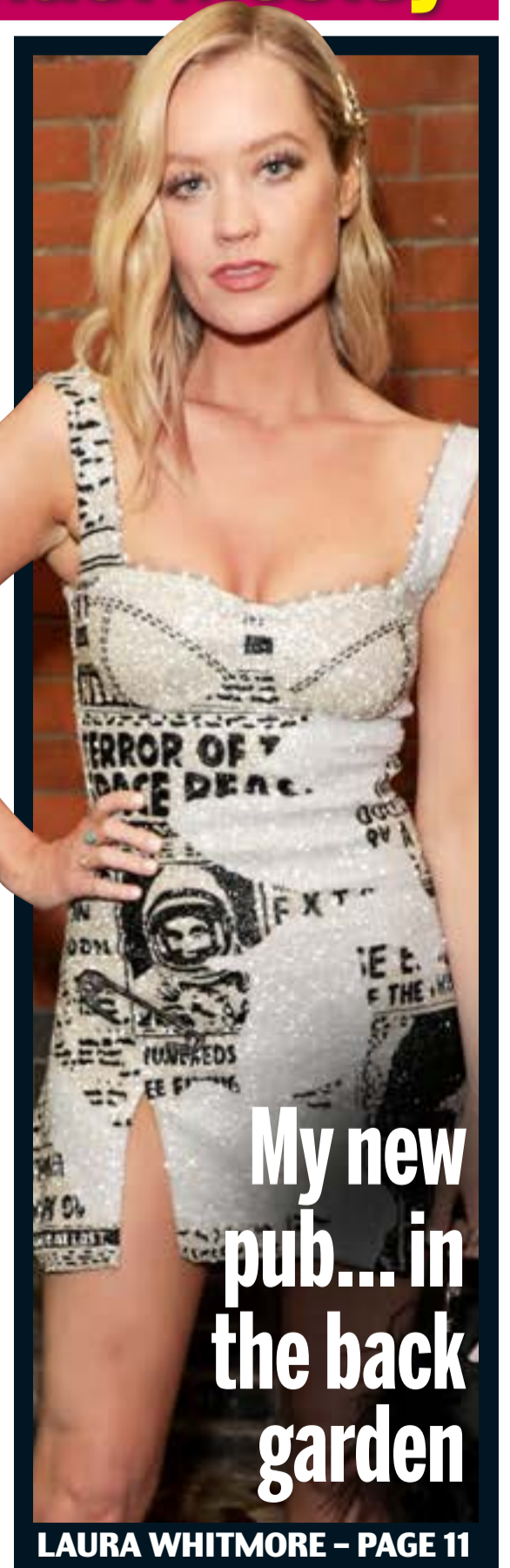
Documents obtained by the Irish Daily Mail reveal that the amount

spent in upmarket Brown Thomas for bedding included over €800 on pillow cases and €1,700 for duvet covers.

Now there are calls for an 'explanation' to the Dáil financial watchdog, the Public Accounts Committee.

Close to €11,000 was also spent on patio furniture from other high-end stores, while more than €12,000 was

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My new  
pub... in  
the back  
garden

LAURA WHITMORE - PAGE 11

# EXPLAIN ALL THIS

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forked out on entertaining at the campus residence.

The property, built at a cost of €2.2million, was home to Dr Fitzgerald before he departed from the role last week.

He suddenly announced his resignation in May, stating that the coronavirus pandemic made it impossible for him to carry out his plans for the college.

As well as being a permanent residence for the president, the house is regularly used for entertaining and hosting visitors.

Figures released to the Irish Daily Mail under Freedom of Information show that since January 2017, in a three-year period, a total of €193,419.30 has been spent on refurbishing, upgrading and maintaining the house. This included the linen purchase from Brown Thomas plus more than €28,000 on new steps for pathways; more than €14,000 on dining tables, dining chairs and lounge chairs; almost €20,000 on building maintenance; and more than €10,000 on general cleaning. Patio furniture set the university back more than €10,000 and a barbecue and associated items cost almost €1,400.

The records show that more than €11,000 was spent on entertainment including Christmas

## 'Accommodation is a benefit-in-kind'

finger food, at a cost of €2,300, and €800 for performances of Christmas carols.

Local Fianna Fáil TD Willie O'Dea said the spend 'seems excessive', adding that the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), when it returns, has 'the right to an explanation'.

A spokesman for UL said the university will appear before the PAC if requested to do so, and that it is a requirement for its president to reside at the house.

'Accommodation in the house is provided to the president as a benefit-in-kind, which attracts income tax and other charges,' they said. 'The house is configured in such a way as to provide a private living space for the president and their family, and the remaining areas of the house are used for university business.'

The spokesman added that the house is also used 'to host university events which promote and publicise university priorities'.

The bedrooms in the house are also available for use by official visitors. 'After ten years of occupancy and regular use, it was deemed necessary, in more recent times, to refurbish some areas of the house,' said the spokesman.

New president Kerstin Mey, who took up the role last week, will take up residence at the property,



## BROWN THOMAS

YOUR home is your castle and that is certainly the case for the university president.

UL spent almost €4,000 at the lavish department store, as they stocked up on bed linen and bathroom items for the on-campus home of the then president Dr Des Fitzgerald, who has only in recent times departed for pastures unknown.

A further €805 was spent at Casey's Furniture on mattress protectors.

Back at Brown Thomas, the spending continued on pillowcases costing €838, duvet covers costing a total of €1,732, fitted sheets amounting to €786 and bathroom products costing €615.

The chosen items were all by Harrison, Angel and Piubelle Premier.



from Vondom.

This figure included eight Faz lounge armchairs at a cost of €640 each, and four Faz coffee tables at €286 each. Another purchase of €2,600 was made with Kettler, which specialises in luxury outdoor furniture.

This cost included a dining sofa set for €1,625, consisting of a sofa, two armchairs and two stools.

It also included a Webber barbecue for €500, as well as accessories including a barbecue cover (€48.78), a grill brush (€12.20) and a premium tool set (€48.78).

And another barbecue, from Sensori, was also bought at a cost of €1,390.

## ENTERTAINMENT:

In 2018, Dr Fitzgerald racked up a bill of more than €2,370 on Christmas finger food, and another bill of €1,400 earlier the same



# Lavish tastes from bedroom to barbecue



November 26, 2019, was also redacted. In all there were six hefty expenses for entertainment totalling €11,329.

## MAINTENANCE:

Routine maintenance also cost a significant amount.

Painting the interior of the house alone cost €7,264.

Building maintenance and mechanical maintenance at the property, both purchased from Sensori, cost almost €20,000 and more than €15,000 respectively. Invoices also show an electrical maintenance bill from Kirby of more than €7,500, and lift maintenance from Cone lifts for more than €4,000.



year when he used services from Campbell Catering in June.

UL also invoiced payments to the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, which is situated on the campus, including a payment of over €400 for singers to perform at a reception at the president's house, to entertain at an honorary doctorate dinner for Bob Geldof and Marian Keyes. A further €800 was spent on Christmas carol performers. Curiously, the names of the performers on that occasion were redacted in the documents.

The recipient of another reception in the presidential property costing €1,558 on

## OUTDOOR FURNITURE:

More than €10,000 was spent on patio furniture for the ground floor and was purchased



on the Clare side of the campus. It cost €1,994,000 to build in 2010, with an additional €189,000 spent on its interior, with all funding by private sources.

Previously described by the then Minister for Education Batt O'Keefe as a 'lavish' purchase, it has paid for by billionaire philanthropist Chuck Feeney, who has been a generous donor to UL for decades. The house features five

bedrooms, a large reception room, a dining room with a terrace, a large living room and an expansive kitchen.

The university's spending has been a controversial topic in recent years.

After building the current presidential home on the Castletroy campus in 2010, UL was under increasing pressure to sell another lavish residence, the second

presidential home in Killaloe, which offers views overlooking Lough Derg.

After laying vacant for almost a decade, this home was recently sold for €790,000 – just shy of its €850,000 estimated value.

The money made from the sale was then put towards purchasing a third property, Larkin House.

Larkin House is on 1.1 acres of land and leads on to a further five

acres of land that was previously acquired by UL.

Last November, the Irish Mail on Sunday revealed that UL spent over €7,000 for a one-night, five-star stay in London for a delegation led by its Chancellor Mary Harney and then president Dr Fitzgerald.

The trip, which took place in June that year, was part of a mission to see how other universi-



# EXCESSIVE SPEND



Flashback: Des Fitzgerald and (inset) The Irish Mail on Sunday stories

By **Seán O'Driscoll**

**BEFORE** moving to the University of Limerick, Dr Des Fitzgerald was Ireland's highest paid college administrator.

In 2009, at the time of the financial crash, he was earning €409,000 a year while working as vice-president for research at UCD. As the nation reeled from austerity, his salary was reduced to €263,602 in 2011, the year that many people were laid off and civil servants were forced to take hefty pay cuts. A Freedom of Information request in 2011 showed that, even at this reduced salary, Dr Fitzgerald was still Ireland's highest-paid college chief.

In his UCD role, he was known for his keen interest in research, which benefited both the college and pharma companies.

A Dublin southside boy, Dr Fitzgerald went to Oatlands College in Stillorgan before studying medicine at UCD. Throughout his life, he has kept a keen interest in sailing and swimming.

After college, he took residency at the Mater Hospital and moved to the US to specialise in cardiovascular medicine.

He returned to Ireland and in 1994, he was appointed the head of the department of clinical pharmacology at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland and helped

## In all, he has held 16 directorships

set up bridging companies between research and pharmaceutical companies.

In all, he has held 16 directorships, including of St Vincent's Healthcare Group, between April 2013 and May 2015, and a separate company that runs the multistorey car park at St Vincent's Hospital, until May 2015, as well as a directorship of the Mater Hospital between March 2014 and March 2017.

In the past, he has been director of several pharmaceutical and medical research companies, including Dabl Ltd, where he was a director between June 2011 and November 2013.

He was appointed president of UL in late 2016 and took office on May 1, 2017, immediately accepting the need for an independent investigation into the college's finances amid a series of scandals. He was initially widely praised for the swiftness of his actions, setting up an independent investigation in his first day in office.

One of the whistleblowers, Leona O'Callaghan, had revealed an uncontested expenses system for some 'golden circle' senior staff. Two other whistleblowers, known

# Academic always top of the class for pay and conditions

## PROFILE

### Dr DES FITZGERALD

as 'B' and 'C' in an independent investigation, were suspended on full pay for two-and-a-half years as investigation followed investigation. All three women had worked in UL's finance department.

While his drive for transparency was welcomed by students and the media, his own tenure in UL attracted its own controversies.

UL continued to maintain a €2.2million home on campus, while the college also owned another unoccupied president's home in Killaloe, worth nearly €1million, which has since been sold.

Figures released show that close to €100,000 was spent on costs built up at the vacant Killaloe property since January 2017.

News of the empty Killaloe home emerged at the same time that the college was finishing new accommodation for students – including rooms so small that there was less than two feet of space between two tiny beds in studio-type apartments.

The college was also hit by a mounting debt problem, also made worse by the coronavirus.

A spokesman acknowledged the debt to the Irish Daily Mail and said the college would run a loss this year and next year.

'UL is in a process of quantifying the financial impact of the coronavirus global pandemic. It seems

likely at this stage, taking into account that additional Government funding has not yet been provided to the university, that a significant deficit will be incurred in both the current year and next year,' he said.

With such financial difficulties mounting, Dr Fitzgerald announced his resignation in May, citing the difficulty the pandemic posed in fulfilling his vision for the college.

Last November, the Irish Mail on Sunday revealed that UL had spent more than €7,000 for a one-night, five-star stay in London for a delegation led by former tánaiste Mary Harney and Dr Fitzgerald.

The trip was part of a mission to see how other universities establish bases in a capital city outside of their home university, as UL wants to establish a base in

## Niche courses to attract students

Dublin, where it could possibly offer 'niche courses' to attract more students.

The newspaper had earlier revealed that UL pulled out of buying a Georgian period property worth more than €5million in Ranelagh in south Dublin after paying a deposit which it later received back.

Sources told the MoS that Ms Harney, the chancellor of UL, had advised them against buying the commercial property due to the optics of such a spend at a time when universities are struggling financially and operating at a deficit.

ties had established bases in a capital city outside of their home university, as UL wants to establish a base in Dublin where it could possibly offer 'niche courses' to attract more students.

The Irish Mail on Sunday earlier revealed that UL pulled out of buying a Georgian property worth more than €5million in Ranelagh, Dublin 6, after paying a deposit which it later received back.

Sources told the newspaper that Ms Harney advised against buying the property due to the optics of such a spend at a time when universities are struggling financially and operating at a deficit.

Correspondence obtained by the MoS under the Freedom of Information Act shows that UL has not given up on its plans to establish a base in Dublin, where a number of its most senior

management formerly lived. The university also recently spent €150,000 on a rebranding

## 'Limit my ability to fully engage'

project to create a 'bold new look' for the college, unveiling a new logo late last year which received

a less than warm welcome from students there.

In a letter to Ms Harney, this summer Dr Fitzgerald wrote: 'Unfortunately, this virus will directly impact my ability to serve the university and limit my ability to fully engage, once we get our community back on to the campus.' His statement praised the college's response to the pandemic while also saying it

made it very difficult for him to continue his role.

'I am particularly proud of UL's response to the Covid-19 crisis, in recognising its gravity early, in rapidly and successfully moving online and in contributing to the fight against the pandemic in our community,' he added.

Prof Mey is the first woman to lead an Irish university.

*lisa.odonnell@daily.mail.ie*

# Woman in 30s dies after two-car crash

A WOMAN in her 30s has died following a two-car collision on Sunday afternoon.

The woman was the sole occupant of the car she was driving, while the car she collided with had two people in it, both in their 70s, who ended up in hospital.

Gardaí are appealing for any information on the crash, which happened at approximately 2.30pm at Garrienderk, Kilmallock, Co. Limerick.

In a statement, gardaí said: 'Gardaí are investigating a fatal road-traffic collision involving two cars that occurred at approximately 2.30pm on

By **Cormac Cahill**

Sunday, June 6 at Garrienderk, Kilmallock, Co. Limerick.

'The driver and only occupant of one of the cars, a woman in her late 30s, was taken to Limerick Regional Hospital where she later passed away.

'The female driver and male passenger of the other vehicle, both aged in their 70s, were taken to Cork University Hospital for treatment for non-life-threatening injuries.'

Gardaí at Charleville in Co. Cork are appealing for any witnesses or drivers with footage of the collision to come for-

ward. Anyone with information is asked to contact Charleville Garda Station on 063 21770, the Garda Confidential Line on 1800 666 111, or any Garda station.

A man also died in a separate crash in Co. Kerry on Sunday.

The collision, involving a motorcycle, occurred on the N69 at Skehenerin just outside Listowel at approximately 2.20pm. The motorcyclist, a man aged in his 30s, was pronounced dead at the scene.

Gardaí are appealing for any witnesses to contact them at Listowel Garda Station on 068 50820 or the Garda Confidential Line on 1800 666 111.

## Student awards prove future of media is bright



UP-AND-COMING talent in journalism has been recognised, as the student awards for this field has announced its winners.

As part of the Newsbrands Ireland Press Pass student journalism competition, 18 finalists were awarded for excellence in Feature Writing, Sports Journalism, News Reporting, Opinion, School Newspaper, and Photojournalism categories.

Ciara Ní Ghéibheannaigh, a student from Pobalscoil Chorca Dhuibhne, Dingle, Co. Kerry, took home the main title and was named the overall Student Journalist of the Year for her news report, which included an interview with a world champion Irish dancer.

Michael Foley, chairman of the Press Pass judging panel, said the winning piece showed Ciara's ability to tell a story related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

'The story she told was interesting and unusual but said something about so many people forced to stop performing because of Covid,' he said.

'In this case it was a five-times world champion Irish dancer from Ciara's hometown of Dingle. The story was verified, mature and confidently written, and a joy to read.

By **Lisa O'Donnell**

'Ciara's work, like that of the other entrants, are examples of learning by doing - understanding what makes good journalism by doing good journalism, using sources, formulating opinions and writing clearly.'

The judging panel was made up of a group of leading newspaper journalists, chaired by Michael Foley, professor emeritus of journalism at TU Dublin.

Meanwhile, the Press Photographers Association of Ireland judged the photojournalism category, which was won by Joy Nic Niocaill with her submission Life

### 'They don't know any different'

Beyond The Window - an image of a baby with his hand against a window during lockdown.

Explaining the story behind her snap, Joy said: 'My inspiration for this photo and the meaning behind it was taken from the eyes of my six-month-old brother who doesn't know what life is like beyond the window. As we know, strict lockdown has affected all of our lives

**1st place - Joy Nic Niocaill - Life Beyond The Window**  
Joy's image told the story very well, with her baby brother's hand on the window pane. The use of black and white enhanced the picture's impact also.

for the past couple of months now and all we want is for our lives to go back to the way that we were used to... We just want things to go back to normal.

'Well for babies, just like my brother, who have been trapped behind a window and have yet to know what life was like before lockdown, they don't know what the "normal" life is like as they have never experienced anything else. They don't know any different - this is their normal. They have experienced a global pandemic before they have seen their first birthday.'

Press Pass is a transition year student journalism and news literacy programme run by NewsBrands Ireland since 2012.

The free programme, which has been completed by 90,000 students, aims to teach the fundamentals of journalism writing and encourage students to analyse content and form opinions about important social issues.



Care: Luke, centre, with siblings Vivienne and Seán

A MOTHER whose child could have avoided the life-changing effects of a muscle-wasting condition has called for the country's newborn screening service to be expanded.

Liz McMahon's son, Luke Ryan, now three years old, cannot walk and needs to be tube-fed due to a genetic neuromuscular disorder.

However, a simple blood test for the condition at birth would have led to him being diagnosed early and receiving treatment soon after he was born. This would have ensured many of his current health issues would have been avoided.

Under the newborn screening service, babies are currently screened for eight conditions, which are rare, but treatable if detected early.

This is known as the 'heel prick' test, as it involves taking a droplet of blood

### 'Government would save itself millions'

from the baby's heel shortly after birth. Some of the conditions tested for include cystic fibrosis and congenital hypothyroidism.

However, there have been warnings that Ireland is lagging behind its European counterparts in the area, with countries such as Italy testing for up to 40 conditions, and some US states testing for more than 50.

Last year, the Department of Health set up a National Screening Advisory Committee (NSAC) to advise the Minister of Health on national screening programmes.

However, parents whose children's quality of life could have been improved by early detection are calling on the Government to ramp up the programme as soon as possible, to help children such as Luke to benefit from early detection of such conditions.

Ms McMahon, from Co. Meath, told the Irish Daily Mail that when Luke was six weeks old, she noticed that he was sleeping a lot, and that his movements were limited.

It wasn't until he was hospitalised with RSV bronchiolitis that doctors discovered that he was suffering from the effects of spinal muscular atrophy (SMA), a rare, genetic neuromuscular condition which causes progressive muscle wasting and weakness, leading to loss of movement.

It affects walking and upper-body movement, as well as breathing and swallowing.

Luke was put on treatment for the condition at just nine weeks old.

However, this was too late for him to escape the devastating impact of the disease. 'We'd never heard of SMA and



by **Lisa O'Donnell**

you're told that your baby has this condition ... and it's just devastating,' Ms McMahon said.

'It's a simple blood test... and if it was included in the heel prick test, you've a good week or two weeks to start treatment and then the child will never suffer the effects of SMA. That would just be amazing. Any child born and the heel prick test tested for SMA, they'd never have to go through what Luke goes through on a daily basis.'

Due to awareness that the condition was in the family when Ms McMahon fell pregnant with her next child, the baby was tested for SMA before birth, and the result was positive.

And thanks to the early diagnosis, baby Seán was able to start treatment at just ten days old.

While Luke needs to be tube-fed, cannot stand and needs regular physio, his brother Seán has largely avoided the effects of the condition.

'It meant that we could prepare for when he [Seán] was born. He started treatment when he was ten days old and the difference is amazing,' Ms McMahon said.

'Seán is just like any other 15-month-old baby - shouting, starting to walk, eating, drinking and doing everything that a 15-month-old baby should do.'

'The Government, if they would just think with their business head, would save themselves millions in the long run because they wouldn't need the follow-up treatment that all other SMA children are getting at the moment. To me, it's a no-brainer, it's an absolute must that they should test for it.'

### 'Losing out on so much of life'

The CEO of Rare Diseases Ireland, Vicky McGrath, said other countries are 'streaking ahead' of Ireland in the area of newborn screening.

'For people living with rare conditions, it would be hugely beneficial to get an early diagnosis, because at the moment, you're talking about five, six, seven years to get a diagnosis,' she said. 'There are therapeutic products on the market now - there are more coming to market that the earlier the intervention, the more likelihood there is of benefits to quality of life.'

Ms McGrath added that it would also help create a record of those living with rare conditions in Ireland, which she says the health system is currently lacking.

'Even simple things like planning,



Difficulties: Luke in hospital as a newborn



Family: Liz McMahon with husband David Ryan and their children, from left, Luke, Vivienne and Sean

## Mothers of children with muscle-wasting disease seek 'heel prick' reform

# MY BABY DIDN'T HAVE TO BE PUT THROUGH THIS

## ...a simple test is all it would take

certainly in Ireland where we don't have any type of access to databases, and that is very clear with what's going on with vaccine rollouts at the moment,' she said. 'There's no joined-up system and newborn screening is a way of providing a joined-up system that we actually understand how many people are living with particular conditions.'

Karen O'Flaherty's daughter

Rose, now four years old, was diagnosed with SMA at nine months, and Ms O'Flaherty has also joined calls for more conditions to be added to the heel prick test.

Rose, from Tralee, Co. Kerry, was 11 months old when she started treatment, and now needs constant care. She has also developed the spine-warping condition scoliosis as a result of SMA causing her muscles to deteriorate.

'There were a lot of months wasted where she could have saved a lot - she was getting weaker and weaker all the time, she was starting to lose her swallow, she could not cough, she couldn't even cry,' Ms O'Flaherty told the Mail.

'Rose is 24/7 dependent on somebody, from the minute we wake up in the morning... She's still in nappies at four years of age, she can't dress herself - she can feed herself...

she didn't lose the ability to swallow. If it was a simple thing like putting it in the heel prick [test], Rose would not be losing out on so much in life.'

A Department of Health spokeswoman said last year that the NSAC made a recommendation to Health Minister Stephen Donnelly to add adenosine deaminase deficiency-severe combined immunodeficiency (ADA-SCID) to the list

of conditions screened as part of the newborn screening programme, and that this recommendation was approved by the minister.

The HSE will now proceed to implement this addition, which will bring to nine the number of conditions screened for in Ireland.

The minister has asked the NSAC to look at further expansion of the programme this year.

*lisa.o'donnell@daily mail.ie*



by Lisa  
O'Donnell

YOUNG mothers with a cancer-causing gene have to fight for life-saving surgery, because of Covid-19 pandemic delays.

Women seeking a mastectomy after testing positive for the potentially deadly BRCA gene have been left in limbo.

This is because preventative and simultaneous reconstruction procedures are delayed due to the Covid restrictions.

Now they are pleading with the health service to prioritise their procedures, and eliminate their high risk of developing breast cancer, so that they will be around to see their young children grow.

BRCA1 and BRCA2 are human genes that cause an increased likelihood of getting breast and ovarian cancer.

Mother-of-three, Deborah O'Brien, learned she had the BRCA2 gene in 2017.

Having lost their mother to breast cancer in 2001, she, along with her brother and sister, decided to get tested and they all received a positive result. Her sister went on to develop breast cancer.

Deborah, now 35, had to consider getting both her breasts removed, a decision she described as a real 'no brainer'.

'My way of thinking is, it's not about me. I've three kids. I need to be here for as long as I possibly can, so it makes any decisions I make relatively easy in my mind,' she said.

In 2019, she met a consultant at St James's hospital in Dublin to begin the process towards have a mastectomy and reconstruction of

### 'That would be two major surgeries'

her breast, which, she was told, could both be done in the same procedure.

However, in August of last year, she was told, during a meeting with her plastic surgeon, that her reconstruction would have to take place at a later date, due to a lack of funding as a result of the pandemic - meaning she would have to undergo two invasive surgeries as opposed to one.

Deborah told the Irish Daily Mail that she is yet to hear anything from the medical professionals about the mastectomy she needs going ahead.

'That's two major surgeries to go through, if I am to go for them separately. Why would I do that when I've a two-year-old and a four-year-old, young kids, at home? I wouldn't want to put myself through two major surgeries.'

'It's double the recovery, double the risk - it's not just go in and do it. It's double risk of not being able to pick up my two-year-old son because my whole bottom half is emptied because I need to use the fat from my stomach to build breasts.'

'Another reason that I wouldn't just go and get the double mastectomy without reconstruction is because I'm looking at my sister - my sister had breast cancer, she hasn't had reconstruction. I see what it does to her. You feel (like you are) not a woman.'

'I'm not another number, I'm someone's mammy. I'm important to people, I'm important to them. I

■ I could have a mastectomy, I was told, but the reconstruction surgery must wait

■ I have been through chemo once and I am keen not to go through it again

# We need this surgery to be around for our young children

know what it's like to not have a mother at a young age.'

However, a spokeswoman for St James's Hospital said: 'Waiting times for planned elective surgeries have been impacted as a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic.'

'All surgeries are clinically prioritised.'

One out of very ten women in Ireland will develop breast cancer in their lifetime. However, women who have a BRCA1 gene mutation have a 60% to 90% lifetime risk, and women who have a BRCA2 gene mutation have a 45% to 85% lifetime risk.

Women who have the BRCA mutations have an increased risk of developing breast cancer at a younger age.

For instance, the average woman has about a 2% chance of developing ovarian cancer in her lifetime,

while those who have a faulty BRCA1 gene have a 40% to 60% lifetime risk. This risk is between 10% and 30% for those women with a faulty BRCA2 gene.

Pancreatic cancer can also be associated with the gene, which can affect both men and women.

Assistant Director of Nursing Services with the Marie Keating Foundation, Bernie Carter, said they are seeing these procedures being put on the backburner due to Covid restrictions, causing further distress for women who have come to the life-changing decision.

She said: 'The decision to undergo preventative Risk Reducing Surgeries (RRS) is a very difficult decision for women who test positive for a BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene mutation.'

'These surgeries are so important

in helping to reduce the risk of breast or ovarian cancer from developing. Unfortunately, due to the current restrictions, these RRS's are not being prioritised.'

'Many women have to wait long periods and face disruptions that can lead to further emotional distress and anxiety.'

Sharon O'Connor, 40, was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2019,

### 'I'm not a number, I am a mammy'

leading her to undergo a single mastectomy, chemotherapy and radiation.

Despite not being aware of BRCA history in her family, and being told her form of cancer was not a genetic form, she pushed to be tested for

the gene last year, and learned she was a carrier.

'To be honest, it was nearly harder hearing that, than when they told me I had breast cancer,' she told the Mail.

'When you're told you have breast cancer, they tell you, "right, we can do this, and then you'll be finished". Then when you hear you have the BRCA mutation, it was like the rug was pulled out from under me. It's nearly like having a constant worry at the back of the head.'

As a mother of a seven-year-old boy and a five-year-old girl, Sharon, who lives in Tallaght in Dublin, immediately made the decision to have a full hysterectomy and mastectomy to eliminate her risk of developing ovarian or breast cancer.

While her hysterectomy took place last December, she is yet to



'It's not about me': Deborah O'Brien



Carrier: Sharon O'Connor tested positive for BRCA

receive a timeline for when her mastectomy will take place, which she said is a constant worry.

'If they were to say to me, we can do the surgery in six months, I'd be like, that's fine, I can get my head around it. It's not knowing when I can get that surgery that weighs on your mind,' she said.

'I've been through cancer treatment once and I really don't want to go through it again.

'There was no other option in my head. After being through chemo once, I'm very keen not to have to go through it again.

'I coped fine but I don't want to have to be in a situation where even a tiny bit of cancer is found, I just really don't want to go through that again. For me, when I was told I had it (BRCA),

my initial thought and my gut feeling was, they have to take out whatever they can take out.'

Director of Advocacy with the Irish Cancer Society, Rachel Morrogh, told the Mail that there appears to be particular delays in cases where the patient requests breast reconstruction

### 'The waiting is a constant worry'

surgery along with having the mastectomy they need.

'We have heard, over the course of the pandemic, from a number of women at high genetic risk of cancer who have had or are waiting for preventative surgeries such as mastectomies

to help reduce their risk, but who are still in the dark as to when they can get a follow-up breast reconstruction,' she said.

'This can cause huge anxiety and confusion and people need a clear pathway to reconstruction surgery,' she said.

While the thought of undergoing the BRCA test is daunting for those who think they may be a carrier, Deborah urged anyone who is aware of the gene in their family not to delay getting tested.

'I was 15 when my Mam died. I was aware that it was something that was a possibility.

'It's not something that you take on lightly, it's something I worry about every day,' she said.

'Knowledge is key. I wouldn't shy away from wanting to know,' she advised.

A spokeswoman for the HSE said: 'In March 2020, national clinical guidance on surgical prioritisation was made available by the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland.

'It stated all breast reconstruction can be delayed for more than three months. The guidance was endorsed by the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland, England, Glasgow and Edinburgh.

'The benefit of surgery must be balanced against the risk of Covid-19 exposure associated with treatment.

'Breast reconstruction

### 'Knowledge is key, don't shy away'

following mastectomy requires a longer length of stay and is more complex than mastectomy alone and there is a requirement post-operatively for one-to-one nursing for certain specialist breast reconstructions.

'This would be unwise during the pandemic because of the increased risk of developing Covid-19 during the patient's hospital stay.

'Staffing such specialist nursing is challenging during a pandemic. Surgical cancer patients are considered a high-risk group with poorer outcomes if they develop Covid-19 infection especially those undergoing complex surgery.

'Patients would benefit from a reduced stay and therefore less risk of contracting Covid-19.'

■ Anyone effected by this can access the Marie Keating Foundation's dedicated BRCA page at: [mariekeating@ie/cancer-information/brcal](mailto:mariekeating@ie/cancer-information/brcal)

[lisa.o'donnell@daily.mail.ie](mailto:lisa.o'donnell@daily.mail.ie)

# CORONA SNAPS

## Backlog sees a massive delay in driving tests

DRIVERS in almost a quarter of households have been affected by driving test delays due to the lockdown.

According to the Road Safety Authority (RSA), the pandemic has led to a large backlog because the test centres are only offering appointments to essential workers.

A recent survey of 4,000 motorists by AA Ireland found 22.82% of those asked strongly agreed that one or more members of their household were negatively affected by the delays.

Conor Faughnan of the AA said that he believes the decision to restrict the driving test to essential workers was the right thing to do but said the longer this goes on, 'the longer the waiting list for a test date becomes'.

He said: 'When restrictions ease and we are in a position for regular testing to resume, it's important that the RSA receive the required support from Government to take the steps necessary to minimise the delay.'

Those who are on the waiting list will be contacted and invited to book an appointment as the country moves through the various restrictions.

## Happier Pear trim the fat...

THEY are the twins who tapped into the demand for healthy food with their Happy Pear business but Stephen and Dave Flynn have revealed they have been forced to close several cafés due to Covid-19.

The wellness gurus ran four cafés - two in Greystones, Co. Wicklow, and one each in Clondalkin, south Dublin, and Dublin Airport - before the pandemic.

However, the Wicklow pair, 41, have now revealed they have closed several of their cafés since the onset of the pandemic. Speaking to Newstalk, the brothers said after meeting a 'business philosopher', they decided that they would be more content sizing down.

The process, they admitted, was sped up by Covid-19's arrival but that they are happier to have a smaller set-up now.

## Worrying rise of 'coronasomnia'

THE Covid crisis has turned people into ultra-stressed 'coronasomniacs', plagued by night terrors and financial worries, a new sleep survey has found.

Research shows that sleepless nights are being suffered due to worries about family and finances and are leaving people tired, irritable, confused and angry, with a range of worrying physical and mental health conditions.

These conditions include night sweats, night terrors, recurring nightmares, waking up screaming and sleep apnoea - where people momentarily stop breathing when sleeping, which can cause heart attacks and strokes.

DFI Beds' Covid-19 Sleep Survey found almost 40% suffer 'unusual restlessness', 9% have recurring nightmares and 20% wake with a start. More than 90% have been waking up more.