



by Louise  
Burne

**E**VERY night when Linda Dalton is going to bed, her husband Graham kisses her on the forehead and says: 'I hope I see you in the morning.'

The 45-year-old Kilkenny woman is currently suffering from breathlessness when she talks. She cannot hold a hairbrush, she feels persistent pain in her right side and only recently found out that she has an unidentified mass in her ribcage.

Despite all of these serious issues, doctors cannot definitively say what is wrong with her. Linda is thought to be one of the growing number of people suffering from 'Long Covid', the term used to describe the ailments and persisting symptoms experienced by people who previously contracted the coronavirus.

Medical journal The Lancet says that Long Covid, or post-Covid-19 syndrome, occurs when people have had symptoms for more than 12 weeks.

A recent study conducted by researchers in Trinity College Dublin found that fatigue, ill health and breathlessness are all common following Covid-19. It was also discovered that the severity of Long Covid is often unrelated to the severity of the initial infection. A study of 153 patients found that 62% of people had not returned to full health 75 days after contracting the virus. Another 47% reported fatigue.

Lung scarring was seen in just 4% of cases with Dr Liam Townsend saying that he was 'surprised' and that researchers 'expected a greater number of abnormal chest X-rays'.

This appears to be one of the biggest issues for people suffering long Covid —

**'I had all the symptoms of a stroke'**

tests are coming back clear and there are no answers.

Linda was just one of dozens of people still suffering from long-term Covid-19 side effects who took to the airwaves on RTE's Liveline this week. She told Joe Duffy that she was 'upset' when an MRI scan came back clear after she suffered a suspected stroke as she believed it would explain what was wrong with her.

Days later, the grandmother still has no answers. Speaking to the Irish Daily Mail from her home, Linda says she was first diagnosed with Covid-19 on October 10. While she was extremely tired and lost her sense of taste, she had a relatively mild dose of the virus.

In the weeks and months that followed, she found herself getting sicker.

'In November, I got really bad heart palpitations,' she says. 'I felt like I was having a heart attack. I went to A&E in Waterford and they did all the tests. They took chest X-rays, did my blood, checked my oxygen levels. They were all clear.'

'Christmas came and I had all the symptoms of a stroke. I lost my speech, I was slurring, I couldn't lift a hairbrush.'

I was sent for an MRI and a brain scan and they came back clear. I'm displaying symptoms and no one knows why.'

Linda even goes so far as to say she was hoping she would get a stroke diagnosis because at least then, doctors would be able to give her some answers and treatment.

'I got a CT scan on my ribcage and lungs. There is scarring on my lungs and I'm now on an inhaler for the rest of my life. I never had asthma, I never smoked. There is a mass growing in my right rib cage.

I don't know what the mass is. 'I feel like a 65-year-old in a 45-year-old's body. Before this, I was fit — I cycled 20km three times a week.'

To date, Linda has spent over €2,000 looking for answers. She hasn't received any.

While there are some specialised post-Covid clinics set up in hospitals around the country, referrals are generally made for patients who have been admitted to hospital for Covid-19. At present, there are two centres in Dublin and one in Cork.

Linda has tried to get an appointment privately at the centre in St Vincent's Hospital but says she has been told she cannot be seen until the end of April at the earliest. She feels people like her are being let down by the health

service. Financial services worker Rachael Dandy has managed to attend the Long Covid clinic in Dublin's St Vincent's Hospital.

The mother-of-two from Greystones was first diagnosed with Covid-19 on October 5. Over the next number of days, she became increasingly ill.

Just 15 days after her diagnosis, Rachael ended up in A&E unable to breathe. Following this visit, she was referred to the Long Covid clinic on January 14. Rachael spent 45 minutes with an infectious disease specialist during her visit. They spoke about her initial diagnosis, pre-existing illnesses and her mental health. She then underwent ECGs, blood tests and oxygen tests. The finance worker has yet to receive her results but will

return to the clinic on April 1. She has also been referred to a neurologist and a clinical psychologist.

Rachael says she is now living a 'half-life' due to extreme tiredness,

**'It is hard on people who are very sick'**

loss of memory and issues with her sight.

She has also had persistent migraines over the last number of months and has been unable to go to work. In addition, her forgetful-

ness often upsets her young son. The worst part, however, is the loneliness.

'I can't tell you how much you know I've upset my eight-year-old son over the last few months,' she says sadly.

'I keep forgetting to do things, simple things. I'd be sitting here on my phone and I'd need to charge it. By the time I get to the living room door, I can't remember what I've got up for. It's frightening.'

'It's a very lonely illness. When you're in the acute stage, you're obviously on your own all the time. Now, life goes on. My husband goes to work and my kids are usually in school. You're literally here on your own because you don't even have the energy to go for a walk.'

While it is clear that some people

# LONG COVID is ruining our lives

**Think that a mild dose of Covid is an easy thing to get over? Think again, as these sufferers describe breathing issues, terrifying hallucinations and memory loss months after their diagnoses**



**Still suffering: (Main) Rachael Dandy and (above) Linda Dalton are experiencing severe Long Covid symptoms**

are suffering from Covid-19 symptoms months after their initial diagnosis, doctors have been unable to fully treat patients or explain why they are unwell. Dr Aidan O'Brien, Consultant Respiratory Physician at University Hospital Limerick, says studies have shown that up to 40% of patients are still showing significant symptoms two to three months after being hospitalised. However, it's not clear why some people get Long Covid and others do not. 'There seems to be some correlation between breathlessness and general fatigue,' he says. 'The initial data is showing that some of it is due to damaged lungs. It can also be pulmonary fibrosis due to Covid pneumonia. That seems to

be the only thing you prove with a CAT scan.' In fact, he says, in most cases of Long Covid there is no lung damage and doctors are yet to determine exactly what the reason behind Long Covid is. 'Sometimes, the severity of the Long Covid doesn't seem to correlate with the degree of severity of the illness,' Dr O'Brien says, adding that in some cases, heart function can be affected and that intracellular muscle damage can also lead to persistent symptoms. The lack of answers from doctors has become increasingly frustrating for Long Covid victims. Tanja (who did not wish to use her surname) describes herself as a 'science nerd' and discovered that

she had Long Covid after carrying out her own research. The 45-year-old suffered from an asymptomatic case of Covid-19 in mid-March and did not initially realise that she had the virus. The only thing she noticed was that her sense of smell disappeared. After researching, she and her husband both went for tests that returned positive results. Three months later, she started feeling unwell again but believed she was suffering from early menopause. However, after experiencing a 'smell hallucination', she started to research again. 'I remember lying in bed resting and I screamed out to my husband, "The kitchen is on fire!"' she recalls. 'I went to grab the kids and brought them into the bathroom. I

started putting towels under the door and was getting ready to call 999.' Her husband was shocked at Tanja's actions. 'He said, "What are you on about, woman?" But I could smell the smoke. Anybody else would have thought they were having a mental breakdown. I am such a science nerd that I went straight to the internet. 'I found this one theory in a paper saying that smell hallucinations were a part of Covid. Then I started to look at my symptoms being potentially something to do with Covid. 'You can have a great doctor who has heard of Long Covid, but they probably won't be able to do anything for you. 'My doctor is great, but I went in with my own diagnosis with a stack of medical papers. But most people aren't me and are going in look-

mind. There were days when I would stop in the middle of a sentence and look at people and go, "I have no idea what I was talking about."' In a statement to the Irish Daily Mail, a HSE said there is no national data to confirm how many people have Long Covid. 'We know that the clinical course of viral illnesses varies between people and that the virus that causes Covid-19 can be detected in some people for many weeks. However, this does not mean that people are infectious for a prolonged period of time,' the statement said. 'Covid-19 is a multisystem infection and may impact people in differing ways. We have no national data at this time on how many Irish people experience prolonged symptoms, though there are some reports from individual centres.

## 'I felt like I was losing my mind'

ing for a GP to give them some sort of clue. It is frustrating and it is very hard on people who are very sick and feel like they aren't getting listened to.' Dr Jemima Nilan, a non-consultant hospital doctor, meanwhile, says that suffering from Long Covid is frustrating because even she cannot find answers. The 35-year-old was first diagnosed with Covid-19 in March and was sick for three weeks. She later went back to work but was forced to take time off in May when she became unwell. As one of 'the lucky ones', the Clare native was able to return to work in September and is starting to recover. 'I was off work sick for four months,' she says. 'I was short of breath. I was coughing. My airwaves were very sensitive — if I walked past someone on the way to the shopping centre who was smoking, I would start coughing. Even somebody's strong perfume would set me off. 'The fatigue is the worst part of it. You could sleep for ten hours and still want to be back in bed by lunchtime. 'The scariest thing was the memory and concentration problems that I experienced. I had difficulty finding words. These were things that were just completely foreign to me and I felt like I was losing my

Specific guidance on what has been referred to as the "long-tail" is presently under development both here and internationally.' 'People who have had Covid-19 are being followed up by their doctors as appropriate — this is usually their GP and in the case of those who required hospitalisation and/or ICU admission, this is hospital-based. 'Longer-term observational studies will be required to understand the health consequences presently being attributed to post Covid-19 infection. The HSE has been in touch with and will be engaging a group of people who are suffering post-Covid symptoms. 'Guidance is being developed to align needs with care provision and to develop criteria and strategies for the ongoing evaluation of patients.' Dr Nilan says that while she understands why people are angry that doctors do not understand Long Covid, medics are also frustrated. 'We always want to be able to fix things as doctors,' she says. 'When we can't and when it doesn't fit in with what we have already learned, we struggle to make sense of it. Because this is so new, there really isn't much information available and we are all kind of fumbling in the dark. 'There are quite a number of us with Long Covid who have not been hospitalised and dealt with the virus at home. Now we haven't got access to any outpatient facility or clinics or specialists to get answers and help. 'If I had broken a limb or I had been in a car crash, you could say, it's going to take X number of months. But there is so much uncertainty.'

## CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

# Time pressure is not an is more than 40 minutes



by Louise  
Burne

**A**OIFE Stokes is angry – and she has every right to be. Her 64-year-old mother, Edna, has been receiving cancer treatment in the Beacon Hospital for the last three years. She is yet to be vaccinated.

So when Aoife read the Irish Daily Mail exclusive that 20 staff at a private school in Bray, Co. Wicklow, were inoculated before her ailing mother, her worry turned to fury.

'We're not saying my mum should skip the queue,' Aoife told the Mail. 'She goes in there every two weeks and meets other patients in the same boat as her. How are those patients and that cohort not the people who receive stand-by vaccines and instead it goes out to people who are in category 11 in a school out in Bray? It is impossible to understand. It is frustrating and demoralising.'

What rankles Aoife most is the disorganisation. Her mother's GP

**'It's infuriating...  
frustrating and  
demoralising'**

told her that the Beacon would be responsible for inoculating her. However, the hospital said that this was not the case.

'We've had no luck in trying to ascertain where she is in terms of getting the vaccine,' Aoife explained. 'The hospital said that they hadn't heard from the HSE. My mum rang the HSE and they said, "we haven't been in touch with the hospital, but why don't you try your GP".'

'That only happened on Thursday. It is infuriating. There is disorganisation and an inability to get answers. Then to read that a hospital with hundreds, if not thousands, of people on their books who are very vulnerable... [inoculated school staff and teachers]. Why they would not form the basis of their stand-by list is really hard to understand.'

Frustrations about the country's slow vaccine rollout have been solidly simmering for months now, but the Mail's story about preferential treatment for the seemingly better off has made that angry reach boiling point.

It's a simple case of the have and the have-nots.

Those 20 staff at the €7,500-a-year St Gerard's School in Bray, Co. Wicklow, were inoculated this week. This was despite the fact that teachers are currently 11th on the HSE's prioritisation list

Waiting game:  
Cancer  
patient  
Eimear Craig  
has yet to get  
her vaccine



and the school is 13 kilometres away from the hospital, which is in Sandyford, Dublin 18. The children of the Beacon Hospital's CEO, Michael Cullen, attend the private, fee-paying school.

It's those that occupy this nexus of privilege, wealth, and class securing an advantage while the rest of the nation endures the toughest of restrictions, biding its time to be inoculated, which has infuriated the nation.

Vulnerable people have said they would have 'crawled over broken glass' to get to the Beacon Hospital to receive 'leftover' Covid-19 vaccines this week.

And yet they wait. While the anger is a common thread, the stories all differ.

Maitiú Mac Giolla Iasachta's 75-year-old father has been attending the Beacon Hospital as a cancer patient for several years and is receiving chemotherapy. He has yet to receive his Covid-19 vaccine and does not know when he will be inoculated.

'It's very frustrating to hear of spare vaccines going to teachers in the school that the CEO's children attend,' Mr Mac Giolla Iasachta said.

'The excuse of time pressure during lockdown is not a valid excuse. Nobody in Dublin is more than 40 minutes from the Beacon. To date, we haven't heard when my father will get his first shot. But to know that doses were given

to people in cohort 11 when they could have gone to higher priority people is not acceptable.'

Another man who spoke to the Mail yesterday said that his father was '100 metres' from where the vaccine was being administered in the Beacon on Tuesday.

The man, who is aged in his 70s, is receiving cancer treatment in the hospital and is undergoing treatment in the oncology unit on the sixth floor.

However, when his son, who did not wish to be named, spoke to staff in the hospital about the possibility of his father getting vaccinated, he was informed that there would not be enough supply to inoculate patients.

The elderly cancer patient later contracted Covid-19 on the ward just last week.

While his son praised the treatment he has received in the hospital to date, he admitted that he is outraged that teachers got the vaccine when the hospital told his elderly father he could not.

He told The Mail: 'We were told they don't have enough vaccines, that they're only doing HSE staff and [the vaccine] would be done through his local practitioner.'

'We are absolutely furious. The school is 14km from the hospital and my father is less than 100 metres from the vaccine clinic. I'm just so angry.'

'I don't know how many teachers were treated in St Gerard's.

My father has terminal cancer; [the vaccine] should be going to him.'

Eimear Craig, 38, from Walkinstown, Dublin 12, was diagnosed with stage IV metastatic breast cancer in October 2020.

She was initially diagnosed in 2018 but relapsed late last year.

She has now moved back in with her mother and father. Her father, who is in his 60s, is also undergoing chemotherapy and has also not been inoculated.

**'I was outraged  
for teachers in  
bigger schools'**

Ms Craig, who is a primary school teacher, told the Mail that the vaccine would have been better going to a public school as they have larger pupil/teachers ratios than private schools.

She said: 'I had surgery and radiation before Christmas. I know what my situation is and it can't be fully cured.'

'It has been frustrating the last two weeks not knowing where I stood with the vaccine. We couldn't get an answer whether it was the GP or the hospitals administering the vaccines for

**Elitism, privilege,  
and wealth... the  
Mail's story on the  
Beacon's vaccines  
struck a chord with  
everyone outside  
that cosy nexus.  
And the ongoing  
disappointment  
over the slow jab  
rollout has now  
turned to fury**

people in cohort four. I got a text [yesterday] from [St James's] hospital to expect a call from Citywest but I don't have a date.

'I was outraged hearing about the Beacon. I was outraged for other teachers. In a private school, they have a small number of students. In the school I work in, we have 30 in a class and we don't have the same resources.'

Ms Craig said she knows she will not live forever and the Covid-19 vaccine would have allowed her to go out and live her life.

'My prognosis isn't good. You want to go ahead and live your life while you can. I want to be working. I want to be seeing my friends; I've seen none of my friends since my diagnosis in October. I want to go out there and make the most of what time I have and I need the vaccine.'

Jan Rynne was first diagnosed with Chronic Lymphocytic Leukaemia in 2011, aged 39. Despite the fact that the terminal blood cancer makes her immunocompromised and vulnerable, she has been unable to get clarity about when she will get her jab.

The Dublin woman regularly has to attend hospital appointments in the Hermitage Clinic and, because of her vulnerability, her two teenage children have not been able to return to secondary school since the start of the academic year.

Ms Rynne said: 'It has had a

# excuse. No one in Dublin from the Beacon Hospital



**Frustration:** Aoife Stokes with her mother Edna, who has been treated at the Beacon

massive, massive impact on our family. I barely go about apart from very, very short walks. With my particular condition, I would be more inclined to contract Covid-19 and get it badly. The vaccines have been that little chink of light all the way through.

'It is very disappointing to see the vaccines being inappropriately used. I would crawl across glass to get to a vaccine centre if they told me I had to be there in 30 minutes. In a heartbeat.

'My GP is under the impression that the hospital will look after

the vaccine but there is not a lot of clarity. The HSE advice is that we don't contact anybody and we will be contacted. It is so frustrating. I'm prepared to wait my turn but I think they should be concentrating on cohort four. I have been cocooning for more than a year.'

Meanwhile, James McGill, 34, is recovering from a rare form of lymphoma blood cancer. He spent nine months in Beaumont Hospital last year fighting for his life.

He was due to receive the Astra-Zeneca vaccine last week but it

was cancelled at the last minute due to the National Public Health Emergency Team's decision to suspend the vaccine due to fears over blood clots. However, he has yet to receive another appointment. Speaking to the Mail, he said that his south Dublin home is closer to Sandyford than St Gerard's in Bray. And he has received treatment at the Beacon

before. Mr McGill explained he is waiting to start rehab in the National Rehabilitation Hospital in Dún Laoghaire but he would not be comfortable starting his treatment until he is inoculated.

He said: 'I don't want to see vaccines going to waste but there were 30,000 [appointments] cancelled last week. I find it very hard to believe that they couldn't find 20 people within a 5km radius of the Beacon waiting with bated breath to be vaccinated.'

'I will be going into the National Rehabilitation Hospital soon enough but I would like to be vaccinated. It is extremely important that I am vaccinated.'

'After spending a year in hospital avoiding Covid, I am so anxious to not get it now. I don't think I would be comfortable going to continue my rehabilitation without it.'

Labour Senator Rebecca Moynihan's father has not received a Covid-19 vaccine despite the fact that he is over 75, experienced two heart attacks and is on immune suppressants.

She told the Mail that vaccines are not 'All-Ireland tickets' as she repeated Labour leader Alan Kelly's call for the Beacon's CEO Michael Cullen to step down.

'The vaccine programme is being done on the basis of need and category of need,' she argued.

'People are quite rightfully very angry and very upset. We're not at the start of the vaccine programme. There

were other schools in the vicinity and there are also people who are stage IV cancer patients in the Beacon.

'If they had contacted anybody else, they could have used those vaccines up.'

'We have called on Michael Cullen to resign. His position is untenable. There are real questions over the vaccination process in the Beacon. Questions have to be asked now whether the Beacon is the appropriate place for that vaccination centre.'

Virgin Media star Anna Daly also expressed her anger. She revealed on Twitter yesterday that her 78-year-old father is a cancer patient in the Beacon. 'This is Ireland where the privileged look after the privileged,' she said.

She told Newstalk that although she understands there can be leftover supplies of vaccine - that it was 'embarrassingly elitist' for a private hospital to focus on vaccinating staff at a private school. She said there are obvious local options they could have turned to - including schools nearer the hospital.

She noted her own father would have 'been there in 20 minutes' if

## 98-year-old granny has yet to receive vaccine

he got a message that a vaccine was available.

Several elderly people have spoken out about the fact that they have not received their vaccine. Declan Wilkes told RTE Radio 1's Drivetime last night that his 98-year-old granny has yet to receive her vaccine despite the fact they have contacted their GP surgery 'once or twice a week'.

Sarah Ryan, who is housebound and lives in Clare, told her family that she believed the HSE had 'forgotten' about her.

'There has been no communication coming to us, no reassurance, no timeframe,' a family member told RTE.

'It does feel like we have been forgotten.'

'At first, she was quite stoic. I would say the last week has been the worst out of the whole episode. We can see the President getting his on TV, the politicians telling us the over-85s are done.'

'We're not getting any communication. She does feel completely forgotten.'

'We were watching television and they were making another announcement, slumped in her chair, sighed and looked at us and said, "I've been forgotten, haven't I Rita?"

They all have their stories, and they all have their anger.



**Outspoken on Twitter:** Anna Daly of Virgin Media

# TDS' CLAPS D



by Louise Burne

**O**UR future nurses and midwives are crying going to work, taking on part-time jobs and doing the work of fully qualified staff while not being paid as students.

There has been widespread anger across the nursing and midwifery sector in recent weeks after the Government voted against a Bill to pay students nurses and the issue has now garnered international attention.

At the height of the pandemic, the wage of final-year nursing and midwifery students was increased from €10.70 per hour to €14 per hour to match the salary of healthcare assistants.

However, this ceased in the last number of months and will not apply to final-year students starting their internships in the next number of weeks.

**'As students we may not even have locker facilities'**

The three Government coalition parties, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party, all voted against the motion, while the 71 members of the Opposition backed the Bill.

Many argued that student nurses and midwives have been on the frontline since March when the Covid-19 pandemic began.

In the last week, there have been an additional 61 cases of Covid-19 among nurses. In the past four months, 24.9% Covid-19 cases among healthcare workers have been among nurses. According to data from the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC), between August 2 and December 5, 21 student nurses contracted the virus.

To date, of the 74,893 Covid-19 cases notified in Ireland, there have been 12,363 cases among healthcare workers.

Finance Minister Paschal Donohoe has said that he 'deeply respects' the work of nurses, but he's also conscious of the work other public service staff are doing.

Minister Donohoe said the issue has to be considered as part of broader public pay negotiations.

But his words and those of other ministers mean little to those struggling to survive – physically, emotionally and financially.

Some are seriously considering emigrating due to the conditions here. While some nurses can avail of a €50 allowance per week when they are on placement, others are not entitled to this.

There are various reasons why students do not receive this allowance.

For example, if the hospital you



Taken for granted: From left, student nurses Caoilinn Doyle, Ciarán Mac an tSaoir and Saira Munir

## No money, no facilities and no future here – student nurses reveal the reality of work on Covid's frontline

**24.9%**

Of Covid-19 cases among healthcare workers have been among nurses in the past four months.

are placed in close to your home or college, you are not eligible for the payment.

Second-year general nursing student Ciarán Mac An tSaoir, 24, was among those closely watching the Dáil vote and he told the Irish Daily Mail that he will also consider moving abroad when he qualifies.

'The Government is disillusioning an awful lot of undergraduate nurses and midwives,' he said.

'If I knew I was going to have to put up with this when I graduate, I'd be buying a ticket to Australia or Canada before I'd be putting a stamp on a letter to apply for a job.'

'There seems to be an idea that when we graduate, we're still being exploited to a certain extent but just not as much because we're getting wages.'

'As a student, you start work at 7.30am. You show up 15 minutes early to your shift so you

can get changed. 'As students, we may not even have locker facilities. As a male student, there are rarely even male changing rooms. For one of my placements, I was changing in a patient bathroom and leaving my bags underneath a chair in the medical office.'

'The Government is full of applause and thanks for us. That gratitude isn't feeding us. That gratitude isn't paying rent. That gratitude isn't getting the students through their degree so that they can provide care to Irish citizens for years to come.'

'Nursing is a worldwide profession. We are haemorrhaging these nurses because we don't value them enough.'

Caoilinn Doyle, 22, is currently in the final year of her nursing degree and will start her paid internship in January.

She finished her third-year placement shortly before the pandemic and later decided to take up a student contract to help on the frontline as she 'felt it was the right thing to do'.

To date, she has done the same work as many of the staff nurses on the ward as part of her degree

without earning a cent during her placements.

This was despite the fact, she explained, that she was only working on a 'supernumerary placement' and was supposed to be surplus to requirements.

Caoilinn said it's unfair to say that student nurses cannot be paid because student teachers and trainee gardaí also work with no pay.

Caoilinn told the Irish Daily Mail: 'In first year, you do more basic care, which is still hugely important. This could be helping with bed baths, washing, checking vital signs and observations.'

'As the years go on, you are expected to take your own caseload of patients. That could vary between one and two patients up to six to eight patients [a shift].'

'I finished my last supernumerary placement in October and I was left with between six and nine

patients in the evening because we had one staff nurse on the ward. There was one staff nurse on a ward of 15 patients.'

'I was staying late and not taking my protected learning time because I didn't think it was fair to leave the staff nurse by herself working with all of those patients.'

'Regardless of whether a patient has Covid or not, they are still sick. We often have patients who need the assistance of two or three [nurses] or a full hoist. You legally have to have two people there. If there's one staff nurse left on the ward for an evening and a patient needs to go to the toilet, they simply cannot bring the patient to the toilet.'

Tánaiste Leo Varadkar previously confirmed that while a

**61**

Additional cases of Covid-19 among nurses in the last week.

**21**

Student nurses contracted the virus, between August 2 and December 5

# ON'T FEED US



Grainne Gallanagh

## GRAINNE GALLANAGH

FORMER Miss Universe Ireland, Grainne Gallanagh, earlier this year criticised the lack of proper pay for student nurses. Grainne, who returned to work as a nurse during the Covid-19 outbreak, said student nurses are 'being taken for granted'. She has been working in a hospital in Letterkenny since she returned to the medical frontlines. Grainne wrote on social media: 'I think it's appalling how they have put themselves on the line with nothing in return... A clap doesn't pay their bills.'

review of the student nurses' allowance is underway, it will not be completed until September 2021.

However, speaking in the Dáil this week, Taoiseach Micheál Martin confirmed that a review of allowances is currently under investigation and should be completed before the end of the year.

As several opposition TDs read the testimonies of student nurses and midwives on to the Dáil record, Mr Martin said that Ireland's healthcare sector cannot 'abuse or exploit' our trainee nurses.

However, the idea of student nurses and midwives being 'exploited' was later criticised by HSE chief Paul Reid, who said the comments were 'extremely unfair' and damaging to healthcare staff.

'There has been general commentary around widespread abuse and exploitation of student nurses and midwives.

'Firstly, and to be very clear, if anybody feels they're being exploited, anybody in the HSE, or anybody feels they are being abused, there are very clear processes through the colleges and the HSE.

'Nobody should be abused or exploited in our workforce and as CEO, I wouldn't stand for it,' said Mr Reid.

Saira Munir, 23, recently qualified as a midwife and was one of the final-year students who was paid €14 an hour at the height of the pandemic.

As a student midwife, the Dubliner worked from 7.30am to 8.30pm for no pay for the first three-and-a-half years of her degree. She would receive two 30-minute breaks a day.

In addition to this, she worked in a care home as agency staff on a Friday and Saturday

evening in order to earn some money. She would take a day off on a Sunday to 'recover', before starting the gruelling week all over again at five o'clock on a Monday morning.

Speaking to the Mail, Saira explained that from the start of her four-year midwifery degree, she was 'thrown in at the deep end' and expected to play her part.

'There were days in first, second and third year when you were left to your own patients when you should have been protected,' she explained.

# 12,363

Confirmed cases of Covid among healthcare workers, in a total of 74,893 Covid-19 cases notified in Ireland.

'If the ward was too busy and they were understaffed, you were left to your own devices.

'For the delivery suite placements, you'd be rostered to one specific midwife and you'd shadow

her. 'After a few deliveries, you're kind of left to do it yourself. You'd always have someone in the room with you but you need to get 40 deliveries to qualify so it is very hands-on from the start.

'You also need to ensure you are hitting all the learning objectives. There is a lot involved. There are 49 weeks of unpaid work across three-and-a-half years. Then you get paid minimum wage for a 36-week internship.

'There needs to be a payment throughout the whole course, even if it is just the weeks you are on placement. Just something to get you by so you don't have to work part-time and you have time to breathe.'

While Saira was paid for work-

ing on the frontline during the pandemic, she admitted that she cannot imagine what it is like working for free.

She continued: 'It's really disheartening to see friends doing placement now and they're working for free.

'When I was going to work at the start of the pandemic, I was crying every day because I was afraid I was going to bring Covid-19 home to my family.

'And I was being paid; I can't imagine not being paid and going into an environment where you could contract the virus.

'Because visitors aren't allowed, you're doing the visitor's job too. You're looking after the babies if the mum wants to go for a shower.

Trying to balance everything was so hard.'

The majority of students and midwives who spoke to the Mail said that they were actively looking or considering moving abroad to work.

One nursing student who spoke to the Mail said that her class was watching the Dáil vote on nurses pay carefully.

She explained: 'Straight away when the results came in, the first few messages were "when's the next flight to Australia" or "who's coming to Dubai with me?"

'It's so sad that those are our options now because of the lack of respect and recognition we receive.'

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**DR MICHAEL MOSLEY**

**HEALTH COLUMN**

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