

Irish Donor Network Expresses Deep Concern at Significant Decline in Transplantation and Organ Donation Rates & Calls for Range of Measures from Government

- *Organ transplant rate down by 32% in 2020 compared with 2019 – deceased organ donation rate down by 27%*
- *Ireland only in 18th place out of EU28 countries for transplants in 2020 (slipping from 14th place in 2019)*
- *Ireland only in 17th place for deceased organ donation in 2020 and 2019*

30th September 2021

Patient groups involved in the Irish Donor Network have today expressed their deep concern about the marked decline in the rates of organ donation and transplantation in Ireland between 2019 and 2020, a period that includes the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The IDN further expressed deep concern that Ireland is struggling in respect of organ donation and transplantation compared with other EU28 countries, slipping from 14th place in 2019 to 18th place in 2020 in respect of transplantation and remaining in 17th place for organ donation.

The Irish Donor Network (IDN) comprises 10 patient groups concerned with organ donation and transplants in Ireland including: – Cystic Fibrosis Ireland; COPD Support Ireland; Cystinosis Ireland, the Irish Lung Fibrosis Association, the Irish Thoracic Society; the Irish Heart and Lung Transplant Association; the Alpha One Foundation; the Pulmonary Hypertension Association Ireland; Alpha 1 Foundation and Children’s Liver Disease Ireland.

The Network is calling on Government to undertake a range of measures to revive organ donation and transplantation in Ireland including: developing an ambitious plan to bring Ireland into the Top 10 EU countries for transplantation and organ donation; increasing investment in facilities and staffing and enacting the Human Tissue Bill to introduce soft opt-out organ donation.

Ireland struggling on organ donation and transplants compared with EU28

The stark figures showing the marked decline are revealed in the recently published annual Council of Europe Report *Newsletter Transplant 2020*¹. Both reports the 2019 and 2020 Newsletters reveals that Ireland had been struggling to keep up with many of our EU neighbours in respect of organ donation and transplant rates, even before COVID-19 severely disrupted services. IDN analysis of the figures (Annex 1) show:

- There was a 32.1% decline in solid organ transplantation² in Ireland in 2020 compared with 2019
- There was a 27.1% decline in deceased organ donations in Ireland in 2020 compared with 2019
- Ireland slipped to 18th place in 2020 in respect of our overall rate of all organ transplants compared with 14th place in 2019
- In 2020, Ireland was only 17th out of the EU 28 countries in respect of the deceased organ donation rate
- The most impacted transplant programmes in Ireland in 2020³ are:
 - All lung transplants down 58.2% in 2020 compared with 2019
 - All heart transplants down 42% in 2020 compared with 2019
 - All liver transplants down 44.9% in 2020 compared with 2019
 - All kidney transplants, from both living and deceased donors, are down 21.3% compared with 2019
- Pancreas transplants in Ireland bucked the overall trend and actually increased from 2019 to 2020, though the actual numbers of transplants involved are smaller (2 transplants in 2019 compared with 5 in 2020)

Range of Measures proposed by IDN

In order to begin to address the current situation, the Irish Donor Network is urgently calling on Government to undertake the following range of measures:

- Develop an ambitious and detailed plan to raise Ireland to the top 10 countries in the EU for transplantation and organ donation by 2025
- Urgently enact the Human Tissue Bill and soft opt-out organ donation to make more organs available for transplantation in Ireland, as per the commitments of the current and previous Programmes for Government
- Accelerate the full return of all transplant facilities used for COVID-19 (and those impacted by COVID-19) for their original transplant purpose
- Significantly increase investment in organ donation and transplantation, including an immediate organ donation and transplant 'revitalisation fund'
- Increase investment in both pre- and post-transplant clinical care staff to address remaining gaps in services
- Allocate additional resources to ensure the change to soft opt-out is effective
- Undertake a review of the impact of COVID-19 from an organ donation and transplant perspective to ensure we learn lessons for future pandemics

Stark Statistics

Philip Watt, Chairperson, Irish Donor Network and CEO Cystic Fibrosis Ireland comments:

"The Irish Donor Network is aware that one of the key reasons for the decline in transplants in Ireland between 2019 and 2020 is that transplant resources, including clinical staff, were diverted to treat COVID 19 patients or transplants and assessments were paused because they were adjacent to COVID-19 wards. This is likely to explain, for example, why the heart and lung transplant programme in the Mater Hospital was most disrupted by COVID-19 compared with all transplant programmes.

“A key concern is the major reduction in all transplants between 2019 and 2020 (32.1%) and the fact Ireland has slipped from 14th to 18th place in EU in the space of 1 year which indicates transplant services in Ireland were hit even harder than other EU countries as a result of COVID-19.

‘ It’s also likely that the number of transplant assessments decreased significantly during this period, so the lengthening waiting lists will not give the full picture of all those who need a life-saving transplant.

“A full review and analysis need to be undertaken by Government to determine all the factors leading to these challenges, including under-resourcing of organ donation and transplant infrastructure. We are also concerned about the continuing delays in bringing in soft opt-out organ donation promised in successive Programmes for Government. While we welcome Minister Donnelly’s commitment to publish the legislation later this year, we remain worried at potential further slippage.

“These stark statistics highlight the challenge for organ donation and transplantation in Ireland. In expressing our concerns on behalf of many waiting for a transplant assessment or a life-saving transplant operation, we wish to acknowledge and thank the very dedicated clinical staff involved in organ donation and transplantation in Ireland. Clinical staff, alongside their colleagues in Organ Donation & Transplant Ireland, the HSE body that coordinates transplant and donation services in Ireland, have undertaken trojan work over the past 18 months in very difficult circumstances. In drawing attention to these figures, this is not an effort to apportion blame, rather it is an urgent ‘call for action’ for Government.”

ENDS

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Notes

¹ Council of Europe *Newsletter Transplant 2021*, yearly edited by the Organización Nacional de Trasplantes (ONT) since 1996:

<http://www.ont.es/publicaciones/Paginas/Publicaciones.aspx>

² The five solid organs used in transplants are kidneys, lungs, heart, liver and pancreas.

³ All data measured per million population drawn from the Council of Europe reports for 2020 and 2019 data.

Annex 1

Ireland continues to lag behind other EU countries in deceased organ donation rates (per million of population). It ranks 17th place out of the EU27 countries in both 2020 and 2019

Deceased Organ Donation Rates in 2020 compared with 2019

From the 2020 Council of Europe figures, Ireland is only in 17th place out of 27 countries in the European Union in respect of deceased organ donor rates compared with 2019 figures (expressed as per million population).

In 2019 Ireland was also only in 17th position the EU. This indicates Ireland is struggling to keep up with the ambition being met by many other EU countries to increase deceased organ donor rates, COVID-19. It is interesting to note that some countries actually maintained or slightly improved organ donation rates in 2020 compared with 2019 – Denmark, for example, actually increased organ donation rates during COVID-19 by 21.6%. However, most EU countries saw a very significant decline in organ donation, even in countries with a very good previous record such as Spain and Croatia.

Table 1: Deceased organ donation rates across the 28 countries of the European Union in 2020 compared with 2019 per million population (p.m.p.)					
Deceased Organ Donation rates p.m.p. in the EU in 2020		Deceased Organ Donors in 2020 p.m.p.	Deceased Organ Donors in 2019 p.m.p.	Change 2019-2020 p.m.p.	Percentage Change 2019-2020 p.m.p.
1	Spain	38.0	49.6	- 11.6	- 23.4%
2	Croatia	25.4	32.0	- 6.6	- 20.6%
3	Estonia	25.4	19.2	+ 6.2	- 32.3%
4	Portugal	24.8	33.7	- 8.9	- 26.4%
5	Austria	23.7	23.4	+ 0.3	+ 1.3%
6	Slovenia	22.4	21.0	+ 1.4	+ 6.7%
7	Belgium	?	27.7	?	
8	Czech Rep	23.3	27.2	- 3.9	- 14.3%
9	France	23.2	29.4	- 6.2	- 21.0%
10	Finland	22.9	25.9	- 3.0	- 11.6%
11	Italy	21.5	25.3	- 3.8	- 15.0%
12	Denmark	21.4	17.6	+ 3.8	+ 21.6%
13	UK	18.4	24.7	- 6.3	- 25.5%
14	Lithuania	18.1	17.9	+ 0.2	+ 5.5%
15	Sweden	17.9	19.6	- 1.7	- 8.7%
16	Netherlands	14.9	15.1	- 0.2	- 1.3%
17	Ireland	12.9	17.7	- 4.8	- 27.1%

18	Slovakia	12.7	17.8	- 5.1	- 28.7%
19	Hungary	11.4	18.6	- 7.2	- 38.7%
20	Latvia	11.1	10.0	+ 1.1	+ 11.0%
21	Germany	10.9	11.3	- 0.4	- 3.5%
22	Poland	10.4	13.3	- 2.9	- 21.8%
23	Luxembourg	5.0	8.3	- 3.3	- 39.8%
24	Malta	5.0	25.0	- 20.0	- 80.0%
25	Greece	4.6	5.5	- 0.9	- 16.4%
26	Cyprus	4.2	5.0	- 0.8	- 16.0%
27	Romania	3.4	4.4	- 1.0	- 22.7%
28	Bulgaria	0.6	2.3	- 1.7	- 73.9%

Data Source: <http://www.ont.es/publicaciones/Paginas/Publicaciones.aspx>. Report on 2020 and 2019 data published in respective reports. Further analysis by the Irish Donor Network based on this data.

Transplant Rates p.m.p. in the EU (2020)		All Patients Transplanted in 2020 p.m.p.	All Patients Transplanted 2019 p.m.p.	Change 2019-2020 p.m.p.	Percentage change 2019-2020 p.m.p
1	Spain	92.2	114.8	- 22.6	- 19.7%
2	Czech Rep	71.0	81.6	- 10.6	- 12.9%
3	Austria	70.8	78.3	- 7.5	- 9.6%
4	Sweden	69.5	76.7	- 7.2	- 9.4%
5	Denmark	69.5	68.1	+ 1.4	+ 2.0%
6	Finland	69.3	73.8	- 4.5	- 6.1%
7	Netherlands	65.7	75.5	- 9.8	- 12.9%
8	France	65.6	87.4	- 21.8	- 24.9%
9	Portugal	62.5	79.6	- 17.1	- 21.4%
10	Belgium	61.7	80.5	- 18.8	- 23.3%
11	Italy	56.8	63.2	- 6.4	- 10.1%
12	UK	54.3	74.5	- 20.2	- 27.1%
13	Slovenia	53.3	44.3	+ 9.0	+ 16.8%
14	Croatia	52.7	72.2	- 19.5	- 27.0%
15	Estonia	46.2	41.5	+ 4.7	+ 10.1%
16	Germany	40.4	44.2	- 3.8	- 8.6%
17	Lithuania	39.6	20.5	+ 19.1	+ 48.2%
18	Ireland	38.2	56.3	- 18.1	- 32.1%
19	Poland	32.7	40.6	- 7.9	- 19.4%
20	Hungary	32.4	44.6	- 12.2	- 27.3%
21	Slovakia	32.2	47.1	- 14.9	- 31.6%
22	Latvia	23.7	20.5	+ 3.2	+ 15.6%
23	Greece	21.1	20.4	+ 0.7	+ 3.4%

24	Malta	15.0	42.5	- 27.5	- 64.7%
25	Romania	12.6	15.1	- 2.5	- 16.5%
26	Cyprus	10.8	12.5	- 1.7	- 13.6%
27	Bulgaria	2.3	7.6	- 5.3	- 69.7%
28	Luxemburg	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

Data Source: <http://www.ont.es/publicaciones/Paginas/Publicaciones.aspx>. Report on 2020 and 2019 data published in respective reports. Further analysis by the Irish Donor Network based on this data.

Table 3: Transplant Activity in Ireland in 2020 compared with 2019 (Kidney, Heart, Lung, Liver and Pancreas) per million population (p.m.p.)

Organ	2020	2019	Difference	% change 2019-2020	Notes
All kidney transplants	25.1	31.9	- 6.8	- 21.3%	The most common form of transplant in Ireland and the EU
Deceased organ donor kidney transplants	19.4	26.7	- 7.3	- 27.3%	
Living organ donor kidney transplants	5.7	5.2	+ 0.5	+ 9.6%	Living donor kidney transplants increased by almost 10%
Heart	1.8	3.1	-1.3	- 42.0%	
Lung (all)	3.3	7.9	- 4.6	- 58.2%	
Liver (all)	7.6	13.8	- 6.2	- 44.9%	
Pancreas	1.0	0.4	+ 0.6	+ 150.0%	5 in 2020 2 in 2019

Data Source: <http://www.ont.es/publicaciones/Paginas/Publicaciones.aspx>. Report on 2020 and 2019 data published in respective reports. Further analysis by the Irish Donor Network based on this data.