

## **New report from the RCPI Faculty of Public Health Medicine calls for ring-fenced investment in early childhood health services in Ireland**

*Investment in public health services in early childhood must be ring-fenced to protect the future population against chronic disease and to reduce health inequalities.*

The *Impact of Early Childhood on Future Health*, published today by the Faculty of Public Health Medicine at the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland (RCPI), presents the evidence that demonstrates the need for investment in dedicated early childhood health services. Taking this action will not only benefit children and their families now, but will protect and enhance the nation's future health.

In the *Impact of Early Childhood on Future Health* paper, the RCPI Faculty of Public Health Medicine proposes key actions to be implemented. These include

- Develop a public health nurse workforce dedicated solely to child health work
- Establish a dedicated Child Health Office within the HSE to provide leadership for child health and wellbeing
- Provide funding and support for important evidence based interventions, such as:
  - Family support programmes including parenting and home visiting programmes
  - Infant and child mental health services
  - Free immunisation services for pregnant women
- Ensure the health system is informed about how best to identify and respond to the needs of children and families by investing in a robust national child health information system
- Continued involvement in a multi-agency co-ordinated response to support children and families in their communities, for example through the Children and Young People's Services Committees.

The chair of the committee which produced the paper and Specialist in Public Health Medicine, Dr Julie Heslin, says these services are urgently required.

“The impact of negative experiences in early childhood is immense. This particularly relates to negative experiences in the first 1,000 days from conception when babies’ brains undergo rapid development.

“We now know that this can have hidden long-term health effects, increasing a person’s risk in adulthood of chronic diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, obesity or mental health disorders.

“This is not only a health inequality issue but also has huge consequences for the economy. The health service cannot afford not to act now to protect our children’s future health. The cost of health inequalities, often caused by chronic disease, could be between €6.5 billion and €8 billion per year. A public health service dedicated to early childhood is part of the solution to this problem,” said Dr Heslin.

“On the plus side, there is an increasing body of research showing the effectiveness of programmes and services which can improve children’s early life experiences, including those provided by the health services.”

Dean of the Faculty of Public Health Medicine, Prof Elizabeth Keane says that investment is vital.

“As a society, we need to invest in our human infrastructure. It is now well established that investing in early interventions is far more cost effective than at later stages. Many countries, including Ireland, invest more as children get older than at this crucial early stage” Prof Keane said.

“The health service has a unique and valued role in providing services for pregnant women, babies and young families. Public health nurses play a key role but their capacity has been compromised by the competing demands of providing care in the community to an ageing population. In some areas, certain services have been discontinued, such as those which provided family support programmes for vulnerable families. There is a particular gap in the provision of infant and child mental health services” Prof Keane said

The report can be found at: <https://www.rcpi.ie/news/releases/faculty-of-public-health-medicine-calls-for-investment-in-early-childhood-health-services/>

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For more information, please contact:

Yvonne McCahill, Royal College of Physicians of Ireland

[yvonnemccahill@rcpi.ie](mailto:yvonnemccahill@rcpi.ie)

086-7723056

**Notes to the Editor:**

‘Early Childhood’: Early childhood can be defined as the period from conception to 8 years of age. However the first 1000 days, from conception to 2 years of age, are considered to be the most critical from the point of view of child development.

Members of the Child Health Advocacy Committee of the Faculty of Public Health Medicine

Dr Julie Heslin

Dr Melissa Canny

Dr Anna Clarke

Dr Fionnuala Cooney

Dr Phil Jennings

Dr Caroline Mason Moran

Dr Ruth McDermott

Dr Áine McNamara

Faculty of Public Health Medicine

The Faculty of Public Health Medicine at the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland works to:

- protect the population from health threats such as communicable disease and environmental hazards
- reduce health inequalities
- support healthier lifestyles
- protect and improve healthcare services for local populations

The Faculty is accredited by the Medical Council of Ireland and is proud to meet the strict standards required to deliver postgraduate specialist training in Public Health Medicine.

Established in 1976, the Faculty of Public Health Medicine is one of six postgraduate specialist training bodies based in the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland. It has close to 180 Members, who are experienced Public Health Specialists and leading experts in their field.