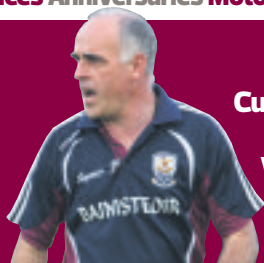


LIFESTYLE & TRIBUNE SPORT

Cunningham keeps clear of war of words with Cody

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www.galwaynews.ie

New health centre strikes at the heart of illnesses

Judy Murphy visits facility that aims to keep people healthy and out of hospital

WHEN 35-year-old Edel O'Loughlin from Mayo suffered a heart attack just after having a baby recently, her trauma was immense. She didn't want to be separated from her new infant, but she needed medical attention and her baby couldn't be with her in hospital. A solution came courtesy of the West of Ireland Heart and Stroke foundation, Croí.

Its new Heart and Stroke Centre just 10 minutes' walk from the hospital has three self-contained apartments providing low-cost accommodation for families of people undergoing surgery at UHG. The apartments can also house patients after operations, when they aren't well enough to go home, but don't need to be in hospital.

At the Croí Centre, these residents are supported by medical staff, as well as having access to hospital expertise. And that's where Edel lived, with her husband and baby until she was well enough to go home, explains Croí CEO, Neil Johnson.

"When people are sick they want to be made well and that costs money"

The short-stay apartments are just one facet of this beautiful and functional new building in Moyola Lane, Newcastle, which will be used 24/7 in order to keep people healthy and out of hospital, if Neil has his way. Croí has always supported "the development of a public infrastructure for everybody", says Neil and this Centre continues that philosophy, with training and education for people at risk of recovering from heart attacks and strokes.

The Croí Centre has a generous exercise area, top-class seminar and conference rooms and consultation rooms. The organisation's 17 staff, from fundraisers to dietitians to doctors, are based here – the first time they have all been under one roof.

It cost €3.7 million to build and has been totally paid for, thanks to the generosity of people from Galway and the West of Ireland. That generosity extended to the site, which the Newcastle Residents Association and Galway County Council gave to Croí at a peppercorn rent. The only public money Croí received was €60,000 from the National Lottery for a fitout, says Neil Johnson.

The charity Croí was founded in the mid 1980s to develop diagnostic and treatment facilities in the West of Ire-

land for cardiology patients – at that time this part of the country lagged way behind the east coast and that affected people's health. In those early days, Croí partnered with the Western Health Board to develop a cardiology infrastructure.

Neil became Croí's first full-time employee in 1993; his job was to raise the charity's profile and fundraise so that it could achieve its aims.

Calm, hardworking and focused, he has proved ideal for the task, supported by an extraordinary army of volunteers and fundraisers. Since 1993 Croí has raised and invested well over €10 million in cardiac facilities – supporting UHG's infrastructure, spending on ambulance development and community education and training.

As the hospital's infrastructure has improved, with open-heart surgery now available, Croí set itself new aims and this Centre was part of these.

The charity decided to build a space that would provide low-cost accommodation for people travelling for major heart surgery and their families. It would offer a space where health specialists and members of the public could be trained in the prevention cardiac problems and strokes.

Even before it was built, Croí was working with people in the area of prevention and with those who have had an incident, helping to prevent a recurrence.

Three years ago, the charity introduced the MyAction programme to Galway. That 16-week course, developed in the UK, targets people who are at high risk of cardiovascular disease, stroke and diabetes by tackling issues such as cholesterol, blood pressure, physical activity, weight and smoking cessation. Research shows that people locally who have come through My Action are sustaining the changes six months and a year later, says Neil.

More recently Croí has increased its focus on preventing strokes. There is an enormous similarity between heart attacks and strokes in terms of causes, explains Neil. If you have high cholesterol you are more likely to have a heart attack, but for somebody with high blood pressure, the immediate concern is a stroke, which affects the brain.

Here, in this new Centre, Croí is developing community programmes on diet, lifestyle, and stress management, both to reduce risks heart attacks and strokes, and to prevent recurrence. Smoking, poor diet, lack of exercise and stress all cause illness, so Croí helps those at risk to quit smoking, lose weight, improve their diet and take up yoga, with a series of programmes, which have input from some of the top medics at UHG in a range of disciplines, including diabetes, obesity, stroke and cardiology.

People will also be taught how to take their own pulse – an irregular pulse can be an indicator of a risk factor for stroke, says Neil. If you know this, you can take action.



Caroline Costello, Exercise Specialist at the new Croí Heart and Stroke Centre, built for €3.7 million and totally paid for, thanks to the generosity of people from Galway and the West of Ireland.



Members of the Croí MyAction Team. From left: Irene Gibson, Programme Manager; Dr Ger Flaherty, Medical Officer; Anne Marie Walsh, Nurse Specialist; Jane Windle, Physiotherapist; Deirdre Henry, Programme Administrator; Claire Kerins, Dietitian and Caroline Costello, Exercise Specialist. Right: CPR training at Croí House.



On the nutrition front, there are much-needed courses on how to read the labels on packaged food. For these, the Croí nutritionist has developed a 'traffic-light' card, so people will know how much sugar, salt and fat is contained in foodstuffs from cereals to biscuits.

And to help the adults of the future, programmes will specifically target parents on how to prevent obesity in families.

Upstairs, in the health and fitness area, people can attend classes where the focus is on the circuit training method – proof that people don't need gym equipment to exercise. Each person works to their own level in a non-commercial environment. Yoga is provided for people who need to reduce stress, as

well as to post-stroke and heart attack patients.

For community groups and individuals, there is also training in Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation, on recognising the signs of stroke and on how to prevent choking, both in adults and children. Again, all are given by trained, experienced personnel.

When courses aren't taking place, Croí will make the centre's meeting rooms and conference facilities available to corporate enterprises.

Three adjoining conference rooms off the downstairs lobby are all sound-proofed, so can be used simultaneously for training or conferences. Alternatively, they can be converted into one big room, accommodating 200 people, with video-conferencing facilities. A nearby

kitchen can be used for catering.

These rooms are available for corporate companies, in return for a contribution, as is the spacious upstairs boardroom, known as the Creganna Suite. Creganna was the first company to partner with Croí under a fundraising scheme to name the rooms in the building, explains Neil. Already Croí has hosted groups from the university, as well as not-for-profit organisations and people in the health arena.

This new Centre has another exciting, new dimension. Croí and NUI Galway are offering a Masters in preventative cardiology, the first of its kind in Ireland. Here doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, dietitians and pharmacists will learn about preventing strokes, heart attacks and cardiac arrests. The only

other one in Europe is in London and the co-ordinator of that course is moving here to work with the MA Director, Dr Ger Flaherty, explains Neil. This course, which is part-time, will eventually cater for 20 people.

Other countries already have Prevention Cardiology Specialists but in Ireland, it's all about intervention. Croí is helping to change that. It is also developing a programme with GPs in the area of weight management and exercise prescription. Prevention, prevention, prevention, stresses Neil.

Ultimately, that would mean a better value health system, he points out. "When people are sick they want to be made well and that costs money. Hospitals consume huge amounts of money and because of that, people have taken their eye off the other end of the spectrum, namely prevention."

But Croí has its eye on the ball, as this Centre proves. "It's a mishmash of very ambitious projects all rolled into one building, all dedicated to prevention and recovery."

The courses being offered to the public are either free or people can make a contribution, says Neil, who is in favour of "the social enterprise model", which involves applying a commercial model for non-commercial gain.

"You run a course and people will pay a nominal fee which will defray the cost of the course – and also give it value. "As far as I know, there is nothing like this anywhere in Europe – a centre that's purpose built to work in prevention and rehab in the community, with a level of co-operation from the medical specialities. There are centres in the US but they tend to be attached to private hospitals," he points out.

Its existence is all down to the Croí volunteers and the public's generosity, says Neil, and it is there to help anybody who needs it.

Series of events to heighten health awareness

TO mark the opening of its magnificent new Centre in Newcastle, Croí is hosting a series of talks, seminars, workshops, health screening and assessments from September 17 to 22. These free events are open to everybody and are invited to visit the €3.7 million facility, which has been funded almost entirely by public money.

Highlights include Wise2Weight, a seminar for parents concerned about 'family weight', especially in children. The focus is on practical tips to prevent obesity. Speakers include obesity specialists, dietitians, and physical activity specialists. The event has been sponsored by Nigel's Cycles and admission is free. It's on Saturday,



The new Croí Heart and Stroke Centre.

September 22 from 9am to 1pm. Places are limited so booking is advisable on 091 893515

Heart Specialist Dr Jim Crowley

and Stroke Specialist Nurse, Patricia Galvin will give a public talk on the

signs and symptoms of heart attack and stroke at 8pm on Thursday, September 20. Admission is free.

Olympic athlete and NUIG Medical Student Paul Hession will give a public talk on Wednesday, September 19, at 8pm on his journey from Mosney to the Olympics, and the role of fitness, health and exercise in his life.

Other talks during the week include **Is there sex after heart disease?**, **Quitting smoking for life: The real benefits of exercise**, and **Reducing cholesterol and blood pressure through change of lifestyle**.

For further information on all these events visit www.croi.ie or phone 091-544310.