



The Centre for
Cross Border Studies

MEDIA WATCH

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19 June 2017

Health service told to 'prepare for worst'; Hard Brexit may restrict freedom of movement to get treatment in UK

Ireland should "prepare for the worst" in terms of Brexit's impact on the health service, according to an Oireachtas report. A hard Brexit could curtail the freedom of movement of people seeking to access health services abroad, as well as causing delays in ambulance travel across the Border and in the recruitment of staff, the report by the Oireachtas health committee warns.

The committee expresses concern at the lack of detailed information on the number of Irish people using EU schemes to obtain treatment in the UK. It says this data needs to be captured so alternatives can be put in place in the event of Irish people being unable to access these schemes as a result of a British pullout from the EU.

Treatment abroad

Of 1,700 treatments funded under the cross-Border directive last year, about 700 were provided in Northern Ireland, according to the Department of Health. It says it is likely other Irish patients have been treated elsewhere in the UK, but it does not have the figures. Of 613 patients funded under the treatment abroad scheme, 574 went to the UK.

The report says a robust system to "fast-track" ambulances and other time-sensitive travel for healthcare needs to be put in place, so Border controls do not cause delays.

Existing cross-Border health agreements, such as the all-island children's heart surgery programme, needs to be safeguarded from any negative impact cause by a British withdrawal from the EU, it says.

In addition, the mutual recognition of doctors between Ireland and the UK must be retained after Brexit, to minimise possible disruption to health services. Any disruption caused by a divergence in the regulation of medical products also needs to be minimised.

Committee chairman Dr Michael Harty said Ireland could be sharply affected by the UK's withdrawal from the EU. "Whether or not the concern around these issues will be substantiated will not be known for some time.

Meanwhile, Irish Ambassador Daniel Mulhall said last night Ireland expects "a transition arrangement will be required" after Brexit.

Mr Mulhall told BBC Radio he expected the EU "to recognise the special circumstances that apply in Northern Ireland and to act accordingly in order to minimise the impact of Brexit on the border in Ireland, on the peace process and on the common travel area."

Source: The Irish Times

21 June 2017

'I had operation in the North and the HSE paid me back'

DUBLINER Deborah Lennon Sheils had a hip operation in the private Kingsbridge Hospital in Northern Ireland, under the Cross Border Healthcare Directive, and now wants to spread the word to others who are struggling on waiting lists.

She took out a loan and paid upfront for the operation, but was later reimbursed by the HSE.

If Brexit triggers, patients like Ms Sheils could no longer enjoy the convenience of travelling to Northern Ireland or Britain for the service and will be forced further afield in Europe.

"My son lives in England and I thought it would be great to find a hospital close to him with the UK being still in the EU," she said. "Then I thought, why take flights for such a big operation when you have everything only an hour-and-30-minutes away from you?" Mark Regan, chief executive of Kingsbridge Hospital, said: "Making that short journey means patients, who are often in needless pain, are accessing NHS and Royal College trained specialists while the HSE covers the majority, if not all, the costs.

"Yes, of course you need to pay for the treatment before the surgery but with Credit Unions and banks so keen to lend these days, finding the money before the HSE refunds the patient isn't usually a barrier.

"In some cases we've had employers offer to bridge that gap, allowing staff on long-term sick to borrow the money in order to get the help they need and pay it back once reimbursed.

"The scheme has been a lifeline for countless numbers of patients from the Republic. We have seen patients come for minor treatment such as eye cataract surgery right through to complex spinal and hip or knee surgery.

"The distance patients have travelled is equally as diverse, with an 89-year-old coming from Cork for hip surgery through to those in the Border counties of Louth, Monaghan and Cavan."

Source: The Irish Independent

22 June 2017

Northern Ireland needs 'special status' after Brexit, says Irish government

The Irish government has declared it is demanding "special status" for Northern Ireland after Brexit.

Dublin's Foreign Affairs Minister Simon Coveney has dismissed "language coming from London" in recent days that technology alone - cameras and online permits - could bypass the need for border posts on the island of Ireland.

Mr Coveney, who met with EU chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier during the week, said an unprecedented "political solution" was needed to keep the status quo and an effectively invisible frontier.

"What we are insisting on achieving is a special status for Northern Ireland that allows the interaction on this island, as is currently the case, to be maintained," he said.

"It is not so much about a soft or hard border, it is about an invisible border effectively, that you don't notice as you cross it.

"To achieve that, we need to draw up a political solution here as well as technical and practical one, which doesn't really have any precedent in the European Union."

Mr Coveney said the solution would have to respect the territorial integrity of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom.

It would also have to make sure it did not create a back door to entering the European single market, he added.

"This is not going to be a straightforward problem to solve," he said.

The call for "special status" is a departure for the Irish government. It was immediately welcomed by Sinn Fein senator Niall O Donnghaile as a "significant" shift.

Unionists have argued against special status for Northern Ireland within the EU, claiming it is being planned as a back door to a united Ireland.

Mr Coveney said the language coming from Dublin on Brexit over the past week has been somewhat different to language coming from London.

"I have heard talk about the needs to ensure we do not have the re-emergence of a hard border and some people seem to be talking in the context of using technology to make sure that isn't the case," he said.

"For me, that misses the point totally.

"This is not about finding a way of avoiding queues on roads through cameras and people being able to apply online for permits to travel between jurisdictions."

The Foreign Affairs Minister also urged an all-island approach to Brexit if the Stormont power-sharing executive in Northern Ireland can be restored.

Talks aimed at breaking a political impasse in the region are ongoing ahead of a deadline for agreement at the end of this month.

Mr Coveney was speaking at the launch in Dublin of a parliamentary committee report on the threat of Brexit to the Good Friday Agreement, the 1998 deal which cemented peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland after decades of conflict.

The report outlines cross-border cooperation, EU funding for the region, the border, constitutional issues and reconciliation as key issues of concern.

Kathleen Funchion, chairwoman of the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, said the UK's decision to pull out of the EU has brought huge uncertainty to work ongoing to maintain peace-building.

"We have heard much about the economic impact Brexit may have on this island," she said.

"We have not heard so much about the psychological impact. It is the psychological impact that has the potential to derail the peace process that so many have worked so hard to achieve."

Ulster Unionist Party leader Robin Swann said he was disappointed at Mr Coveney's calls for "special status" in Northern Ireland, which he described as "a thinly veiled attempt to break up the union".

"As the Belfast Agreement makes clear, Northern Ireland is an integral part of the United Kingdom until its people say otherwise," he said.

"'Special status' would undermine the principle of consent enshrined in the agreement.

"With the Republic of Ireland's economy intrinsically linked to that of the United Kingdom, perhaps Minister Coveney would be better served seeking special arrangements for his country after Brexit, which may be one way to overcome some of the challenges which Brexit presents."

Source: The Belfast Telegraph