

Improving the quality of life of older people

Paul McGill emphasises the role of research in identifying the future needs of Ireland's ageing population

It may be considered a sign of society's success that we are living longer than ever before. By 2041 the number of people aged 75+ in Ireland will more than triple to one million. People living to 95 or older will expand eleven-fold to nearly 48,000.

Ireland has a young society but it will age rapidly in coming decades from its lower base.

The North has an older society, and will see increasing growth in all the older age groups. Its population aged 75+ is projected to double to 217,000 by 2031 and to continue growing to 280,000 after another decade. Both the Central Statistics Office and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency project the numbers aged 60+ in 2041 to make up precisely the same share of the total population (29.4 per cent) in each part of the country. This adds up to 2.4 million people on the entire island, making up a huge block of older people using public services, spending billions of euros on the goods and services provided by the private sector and contributing through work and volunteering to the voluntary and community sector and to their families through child-minding.

There will be particularly strong expansion among the very old. The 85+ cohort, which now makes up 1.5 per cent of the North's population, will rise to 5 per cent by 2041; in the Republic it will increase from 1.1 per cent to 4.1 per cent. In the country as a whole, the number of people aged 85+ will expand from 74,000 in 2006 to 356,000 in 2041. This group will be heavy users of health and social care services.

One of the greatest challenges now facing the two governments is how to promote healthy ageing for citizens – to ensure longer lives are spent actively, happily and independently rather than accompanied by more years of disability and ill-health and longer periods depending on care.

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number of years spent in good health. Statistics from Eurostat show that the total number of years people can expect to live at birth and at age 65 has continued to rise steadily in recent years but the number of years they can expect to live in good health

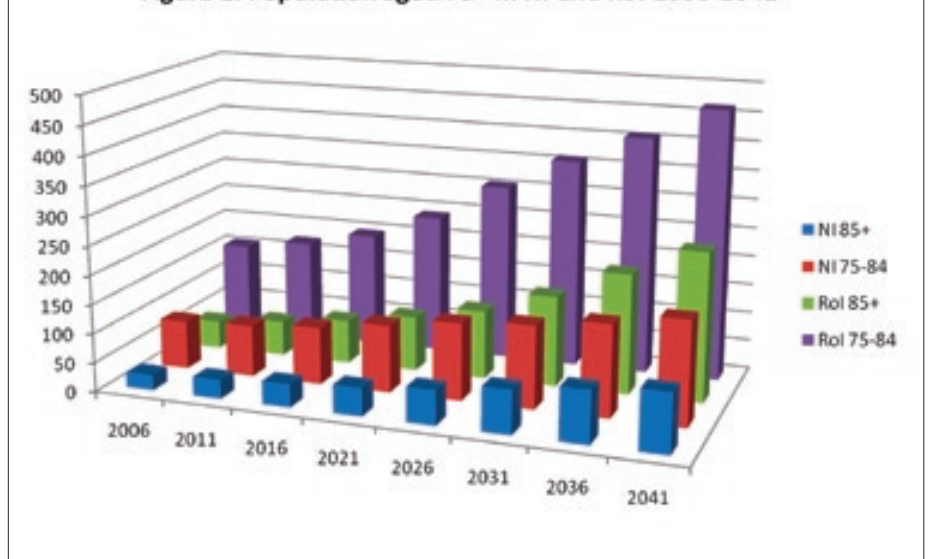
has not increased to the same extent or has actually fallen.

Looking first at the position of a newborn boy, his total life expectancy rose by four years between 1999 and 2007 but the expected number of 'healthy life years' fell by one: so his number of expected 'unhealthy life years' has risen by five. Similarly a baby girl's total life expectancy increased by three years but healthy life years dropped by two, indicating the same.

If we look at the prospects for people at the age of 65 we can strip out the effect of better infant mortality rates. Figure 2 shows that the length of time a typical 65-year old woman can expect to live rose between 1999 and 2007 from 17.5 to 20 years but the expected number of healthy years declined by half a year. This means the number of unhealthy life years increased by three. The total number of years an average 65-year old man can expect to live has increased from 14 to 17 but anticipated healthy years have not changed, so again the gap has worsened by three years.

On the other hand, a report published

Figure 1: Population aged 75+ in NI and ROI 2006-2041



Sources: Central Statistics Office and Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency, both 2006-based projections

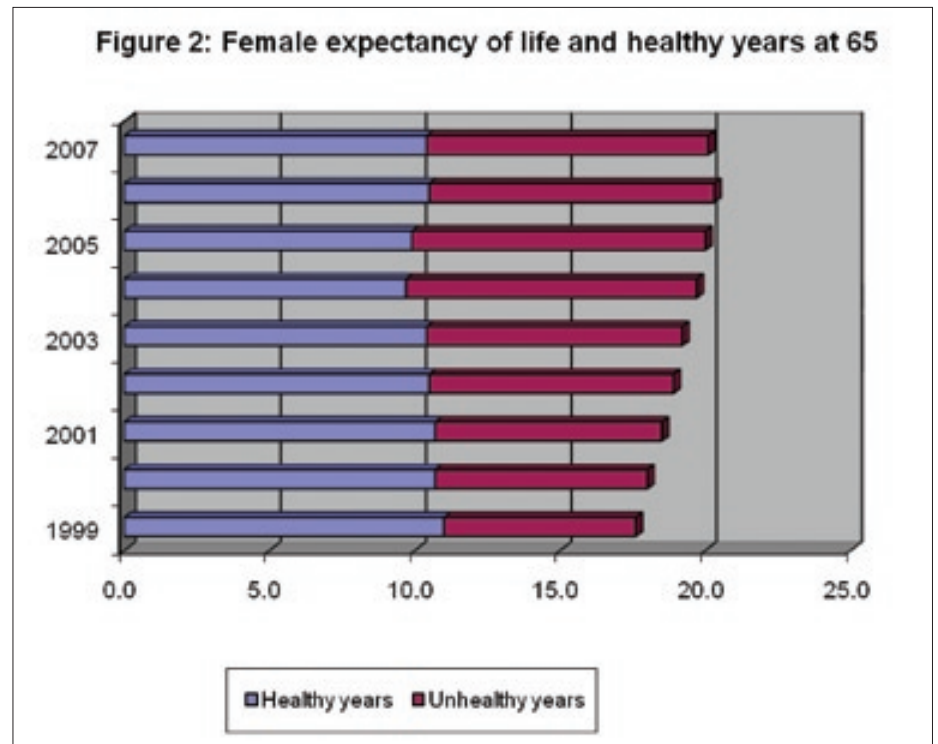
“The people who are most likely to die young or to survive in bad health and disability are those who are disadvantaged through poverty, poor education and social exclusion.”

by the Economic and Social Research Institute in October 2009 on the future need for health care noted that the rate of disability increased for the population generally between 2002 and 2006 (partly because of changes in definition). But it did not change for people aged 72 or older. However the main focus of the ESRI report was severe disability requiring long-term care rather than illness or less severe disability among people who may continue to live at home.

With the potential of greater years in ill-health and the large increase in the older population, we can see the need for well-targeted research helping to inform our future policies and services. The aim should be to ensure future generations have an active and fulfilling older age rather than one in which they suffer from limiting ill-health or disability for ever-increasing periods.

One central issue is that ill-health is not randomly distributed throughout the population. The people who are most likely to die young or to survive in bad health and disability are those who are disadvantaged through poverty, poor education and social exclusion. Professor Sir Michael Marmot illustrated this well at a recent lecture in Belfast when he showed that people in disadvantaged areas of Glasgow have a life expectancy 28 years lower than well-off people in the same city. The Institute of Public Health has published data showing considerable variations in life expectancy at county or district council level throughout Ireland.

In the Republic of Ireland the EU-SILC report from 2007 showed that people on low incomes and at risk of poverty were more likely to report bad health, chronic illness and limiting disability than people with higher incomes. In the North the premature death rate among people in routine or manual jobs is two and a half times higher than in the professional and



Source Eurostat: <http://nui.epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=tsdph220&lang=en>

managerial classes.

This background of a rapidly growing older population, important issues of healthcare, continuing inequalities and the need to plan services for future generations prompted the creation of the Centre for Ageing Research and Development in Ireland (CARDI). Our task is to promote and support ageing research on the island of Ireland, looking at the sort of issues mentioned above. However its focus goes far beyond healthcare and how we pay for the ageing society. Rather CARDI aims to improve the quality of life of older people by building the ageing research community and providing an evidence base for developing public policy and

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services. This includes the recreational, educational, cultural and other activities that older people wish to engage in. It also means transforming workplaces and working terms and conditions to make them fit for those older people who wish to remain in employment – or need to do so because their pensions are inadequate.

For example, there has been a huge increase in recent years in the number of older people remaining in work, including thousands who are over pension age. However, labour market statistics up to the second quarter of 2009 suggest that older workers in the North are holding on to their jobs through the recession so far, whereas in the Republic their numbers have declined sharply over the last year. The recession brings to the fore many concerns e.g. pension, public services, transport provision, housing and waiting lists.

However it also provides an opportunity for the research community to play its role in helping to make the best of existing resources as we plan for our ageing society. Indeed now is the time to actually invest in research and learn from working across the island of Ireland as we match the services available to the various age groups they are intended to serve in both urban and rural areas.

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