**CALL FOR NATIONAL END-OF-LIFE AND BEREAVEMENT STRATEGY**

**AT FORUM 2013**

**Hundreds attend conference on end-of-life care organised by the Forum on End of Life in Ireland –**

The National Council of the Forum on End of Life in Ireland has today (24th October) called on the Government to prepare a national end of life strategy for Ireland and to fulfill its pledge to bring in legislation to strengthen the patient’s voice in healthcare decisions.

 A commitment to lobby for an end of life strategy is contained in the Forum’s Action Plan for 2013-2015 and was launched at Forum 2013, a biennial national conference organised by the National  Council of the Forum on End of Life in Ireland.  The Forum is an initiative of the Irish Hospice Foundation (IHF) and its National Council is chaired by Mrs Justice Catherine McGuinness.

 Forum 2013 took place in Dublin Castle and was attended by 300 members of the public and healthcare professionals.  A series of speakers and workshops explored the theme of “Length of Days – Quality of Life.”

 Medical ethicist Professor Göran Hermerén from Sweden was a guest speaker.  Prof Hermerén isProfessor Emeritus of Medical Ethics at the Faculty of Medicine in Lund University.  The Mary Holland commemorative lecture, organised by the IHF in association with the Irish Times, was delivered by award winning journalist and writer Fergal Keane.

 Forum 2013 consisted of a series of talks and workshops on various aspects of end of life care.  A personal reflection was delivered by author and poet Theo Dorgan at the end of the conference.

During the day, a collective work of art, developed by art teacher Aideen Gough, was also unveiled.   In the run-up to the conference, individuals contributed small rectangles of hessian cloth decorated with the initials of someone significant (alive or dead) in their life.

Mrs Justice Catherine McGuinness stated: “Over the next three years, the Forum will be working to secure a commitment from Government to develop a national strategy for end of life.  We believe that the time has come for the state to look at all aspects of end of life in Ireland and to plan for the future delivery of care and services.  The strategy should be wider than healthcare and reach into other relevant areas of life - economic, legal and administrative affairs.  Death is a taboo issue.  The State should take the lead in starting a national dialogue on dying, death and bereavement.”

She continued: “The Forum is also committed to promoting more engagement and debate with the public on end-of-Iife issues.  We know from our own consultation that people are very keen to have their say and make their preferences known particularly around end of life.  The Government made a commitment last March to introduce a provision for advance directives in the Assisted Decision making (Capacity) Bill at committee stage.  It is vital that they fulfill that pledge.”

 The conference took place on the day that the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health and Children started its hearings on end-of-life care in Ireland.  The IHF and the Forum on End of Life in Ireland made presentations yesterday.

 Sharon Foley, Chief Executive Officer of the IHF, commented: “This is an historic opportunity for Ireland.  The IHF believes that reviewing the care of the most vulnerable members of our society is both worthwhile and essential.  As a country, we need a national end of life and bereavement strategy to plan for what is inevitable, to ensure there is no absence of care, no ignorance of need and that we get end-of-life care right.”

 She continued: “The IHF has also called on the State to develop the specialist palliative care services in the country in line with existing policy.  It is unacceptable that inequity remains throughout the country with some people able to access a full range of services and others – with equal need – denied this access.  There is also a need for more supports for acute hospitals to deliver better end-of-life care and we need to put in place the necessary supports to help more people to fulfil their wish to die at home.”

 About 29,000 people die in Ireland each year including about 350 children who die from life-limiting conditions.  An estimated 290,000 people are newly bereaved each year.  IHF research from 2004 indicated that most people wish to die at home.  However, seven out of 10 people die outside their own home – 26% of people die in their own homes.  Nearly one in two people (43%) die in busy acute hospitals.

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