

## **Cancer political comment - Patricia O'Callaghan**

A controversy is raging in Ireland.

Parliamentary debates are being dominated by it, protests are being organised because of it and nine women are living with the consequences.

In 2007, nine women were wrongly given the all-clear for breast cancer at a hospital in Ireland's midlands.

As with all controversies, investigations were launched into the misdiagnoses.

Meanwhile, politics reacted. The Government with sorrow, the Opposition like hawks.

The Government, the Prime Minister, the Minister for Health, stood firm in defending the health service body in charge of running the country's hospitals, and apologised.

The Opposition attacked, calling for resignations, and heads, but ended up with nothing more than promises that the mistakes, or human errors, which had occurred, would not happen again.

Several months later, after the publication of three critical reports into the Portlaoise hospital misdiagnosis, nine families found out why they lost valuable, life-saving, time in treating their disease.

The Health Minister, Mary Harney, said the best that could be done was to learn from reports.

She said if there were another serious incident like that, it would be acted upon, and communicated, appropriately.

She said people would not have to litigate to find out what happened. She said that era 'was now over'.

While the sickening political rhetoric lingered for months, filling the time until the reports were published, thousands and millions of minutes passed at a snail's pace for nine families twiddling their thumbs, waiting for an explanation and looking for accountability.

The simple importance of daily life got lost inside the massive parliament environment.

In between the two, Government and individuals, lies the public. And this scandal has also rocked Irish people's faith in the health system.

It is a widely known fact that public confidence in Ireland's cancer care services has been pulverised. In November 2007, Professor Tom Keane, head of the Cancer Control Programme, said it himself.

He said one vital job to be done was to rebuild that confidence.

Doing just that is going to be crucial for Ireland, because Ireland is now facing into what has been described as a cancer epidemic in the near future.

The Irish Cancer Society believes an epidemic is in sight in the next 12 years.

Ireland's ageing population and a general neglect of healthy lifestyle are two factors for the predicted increase in cancer cases in a mere 12 years.

Three years ago, more than 25,000 cancer cases were diagnosed in Ireland. That figure is expected to rise to 42,000 by 2020, according to figures from the National Cancer Registry.

The Cancer Control Programme is the weapon the Government plans to send out to deal with the cancer problem.

Now, Ireland must work at making its cancer services reliable and credible as a killer disease looms.