New report reveals that Multiple Sclerosis costs Irish society more than 429 million euros each year

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- Average societal cost per person with MS amounts to €46,900
- 9,000 people and their families live with MS throughout Ireland
- Total cost of relapses amounts to €16.9 million
- Reducing relapses saves up to €10 million each year
- People with MS report on average a 32% lower quality of life than the general population

October 2015 – A new report has revealed that MS (multiple sclerosis) costs Irish society more than €429 million each year resulting from direct costs[1], indirect costs[2], intangible costs[3] and costs associated with relapse. The report, based on an original piece of research carried out by MS Ireland and supported by Novartis, is titled The Societal Cost of MS and was officially launched today at the National Art Gallery by MS Ireland.

Currently 9,000 people and their families live with MS throughout Ireland. This report shows that the total cost of MS each year is €429 million. Expenditure on 'direct costs' including medical scans, doctor and hospital visits amounts to 30% of the total cost to society, or €128.7 million. According to the research, people with MS require approximately 54,000 GP visits per year, spend more than 16,000 nights in hospital and make more than 1,500 emergency department visits annually.

Some 84% of respondents visit their GP six times each year, while it was also revealed that people with MS account for around 21,800 neurology visits every year. When it came to hospital resources, one fifth of those with MS spent up to eight nights as an inpatient.

Overall, each person with MS received nearly 1,000 hours of care per year, some of which are unpaid. A quarter said their carers took time off work to provide care. Within this group of carers, one fifth (20%) had to give up work completely to provide care. Just 14% receive formal care, which is supplied both privately and from the HSE. A huge number, 63%, receive informal care from family and friends. A huge burden is placed on the spouse and partner; 60% report that their spouse or partner is the main caregiver.

The report also discovered that MS has a huge impact on a person's mental health and wellbeing. Of the respondents, one third (33%) had been diagnosed or treated for depression since their onset of MS. Some 27% had been diagnosed or treated for anxiety since the onset of MS, while the overwhelming majority (92%) reported having fatigue due to their MS.

The results also underscored the burden of MS on families and children. Of respondents, 61% said they felt they were not able to financially provide for their children as much as they would like to; one third (33%) reported that their MS impinged on their children being able to partake in normal childhood activities and 73% said it is likely their children worry excessively about their parents' health.

Of the 595 respondents surveyed, 41% reported having a relapse in the previous year, with 1.83 relapses reported in the past 12 months on average. As a result of their most recent relapse, 47% of respondents said they rang or visited their GP and of these, 18% were admitted to hospital. The report discovered the average indirect costs of a relapse are on average €1,101. The report notes that reducing relapses among those who live with MS would result in saved resources.

The report revealed that MS is associated with high costs, many of which are outside the healthcare system. Intangible costs amount to, on average €9,039, which includes missed days at work and costs associated with carers. Indirect costs include transport to the hospital or GP surgery, parking, and childcare total on average €23,274 per person with MS each year.

The research highlights the need for access to interventions that reduce relapses, disability progression, and support working and living independently. It also highlights the need for improved employment opportunities and adoption of flexible work practices, as well as acknowledgement of the unpaid work carried out by carers.

The cost of relapse is a substantial proportion of the overall cost and the analysis discovered that reducing the number of relapses experienced by those with MS saves upwards of €10 million each year.

When it comes to indirect costs, MS greatly affects employment. Employment is lower in the MS population than in the general population at just 43% and is lower for men than women. One third of people with MS report reduced working hours due to their condition, while another 30% have retired.

Dr Killian O'Rourke, Consultant Neurologist, Mater Misercordiae University Hospital and Clinical Lecturer at UCD, said, "The huge impact of MS on patients and the healthcare system has never been so clear. The far-reaching consequences throughout society are very evident. We can see the impact in primary care and within hospitals. One important finding is the burden of relapses, a reduction in which would save a huge sum each year."

Dr Chris McGuigan, Consultant Neurologist at St Vincent's University Hospital and Clinical Lecturer at UCD, said, "The impact of MS is striking on so many levels including mental health, family, children, career development and quality of life. The real-life testimony alongside the irrefutable statistics in this report is very impactful and we hope it drives home the need for added support for those affected by MS."

Loretto O'Callaghan, Managing Director, Novartis, said, "This original piece of research undertaken by MS Ireland shows the economic, mental and emotional impact of MS on the person, their families and on Irish society. Novartis is proud to partner with MS Ireland on this research which has delivered key insights and analysis on the burden of MS."

Ava Battles, CEO, MS Ireland, said, "The research is extremely important for those who live with MS, their families and for healthcare professionals. We now need to use these findings to influence a reduction in relapses and in progression of the disabling disease. Responses from families throughout Ireland have clearly shown that improved employment opportunities are needed for those with MS. Both personal case studies and the research bring to life that people with MS and their families need extra support to ensure as high a quality of life as that of the general population. This report highlights the cost outside the health system that can often be forgotten."

Societal Cost of MS in Ireland Report Click Here (PDF 1.19 MB).

Infographic on Societal Costs of MS in Ireland Click Here (PDF 0.18 MB).

[1] Direct costs associated with MS include spend that is directly associated with the disease but not necessarily a direct cost for the patient, for example GP visits, hospital visits, medical care and medical scans

[2] Indirect costs associated with MS include costs that arise from the condition, such as transport to GP or hospital, parking and the cost of childcare.

[3] Intangible costs include costs that arise from days missed at work, and unpaid care provided by family and friends, etc.

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