

# Broken promises ... broken system

By Niamh Griffin

THE parents of a boy who has waited more than 16 months for a vital scoliosis operation – more than four times the HSE target time – say the healthcare system is broken.

Scoliosis is a curvature of the spine and, when severe, can impact on breathing and cause pain. In 2017, Health Minister Simon Harris said no child with scoliosis would wait longer than four months for an operation. However, even though the number done this year is higher than before, campaigners and families warn a long backlog has not cleared.

As snow falls on Carrauntoohil Mountain behind his home in Co. Kerry, Ronan Foley, 14, is once again preparing for a spinal operation. He has quadriplegic cerebral palsy but is a talkative teen who sings at family weddings.

Until recently, he powered his wheelchair easily around school and Killorglin town.

In 2018, when surgeons at Crumlin Children's Hospital said he needed an operation and that it would take place within three months, his spine was tilted at a 42 degree angle. But he was never given a

**'Everything is sore. I need the operation'**

firm date. Sixteen months later the operation is still several weeks away. Ronan's spine is at 80 degrees and worsening every week.

Ronan told the Irish Mail on Sunday: 'My back is worse now. It feels like I can't move it, it's very tight. Everything is sore, my hands are the only thing that don't hurt. I need the operation, I hope they don't cancel it again.'

Two years ago Ronan was strong enough to sit in a wheeled buggy to do the Dublin Marathon with his dad and the principal of St Oliver's school, raising €3,770 for the school. He still goes to school but is repeating 6th class as his family expected the disruption of an operation months ago.

'I'd like to be in secondary school now,' Ronan said. 'I'm bored a bit now, my friends have gone on so that's hard. I really like my school but it's hard now.'

Watching him speak, his mother Caroline shakes her head. She said: 'He's the best kid you could wish for. It's just unfair. It's exhausting for him, and we're drained.'

She said the hospital is so short of beds they were once notified at 4pm of a bed vacant that night. They travel to Dublin in an adapted van, the journey usually taking three to four hours each way.

Ronan's father Tony, who works for St John of God's at Beaufort residential centre, said: 'It's very hard to see him like this, he's in very good condition for a child like this. We do all the exercises, the doctors were delighted with him and to watch him deteriorate like this is very hard.'

'We were told in 2018 that there

Parents of boy, 14, who is battling chronic pain as a result of scoliosis say backlog of operations has left their son in agony as he waits 16 months for surgery



## GROWING UP WITH HIS FUTURE IN THE HSE'S HANDS



**MILESTONES:** Ronan Foley as a baby, at a wedding with cousin Lauren, and at his Confirmation with parents Tony and Caroline and brother Gavin

was supposed to be a four-month wait, that Simon Harris had said that in 2017. It makes me angry, that this timeframe exists.'

The family stressed how well cared for Ronan has been at Crumlin but say the wait has caused huge damage. Tony added: 'We can see him being compromised before our eyes. We really noticed it last year,

when he went back to school in September, the teachers got an awful shock when they saw him. He had really deteriorated.'

Ronan is repeating a battery of tests with a provisional date for surgery set for the middle of this month. Tony said: 'We are very positive that the operation is going to happen, but the problem still

exists. His well-being has been compromised. It's frustrating, and it's unnecessary.'

The HSE says 170 children are on the active waiting lists for spinal fusion or other procedures.

Claire Cahill from the Scoliosis Advocacy Network said: 'The problem is the backlog; if there was no backlog, they are probably doing

enough procedures per year now. This is a children's rights issue, this is about how our children are being treated.'

NTPF figures released to Ms Cahill show 6,031 children are awaiting their first appointment with a consultant – 899 of whom are waiting longer than 18 months.

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