

interview



Sheila O'Kelly

# Changing of the guard at Asthma Society

New CEO Eibhlín Mulroe sets out her aims and aspirations. Creating awareness of the Society, education, advocacy and support is all part of a day's work. However, the reality is that to put plans into action, fund raising is still the lifeblood of any voluntary group

STRIKING A BALANCE between being passionate about what the Asthma Society of Ireland should do and being realistic about what it actually can do, is the philosophy of the organisation's new CEO, Eibhlín Mulroe.

Appointed in January this year, she takes over from Herman O'Brien. Herman revolutionised the way the Society organised its finances and fund raising. This momentum has established the solid foundation for Eibhlín to expand the Society and raise its profile.

Eibhlín has a strong political background, which will be very useful for forging links with the relevant government departments. In these early days she is still getting to know the nuts and bolts of the Society and she says one of her main aims is to make people aware that the Asthma Society of Ireland exists. "Many people are not aware that we are





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here – and many of those who do know about us don't realise that we are self-funded. We're a charity; we need donations and support.

"The most recent statistics showed that over 400,000 people in Ireland had asthma and 100,000 of those were children. How many of those people know that we are here representing them and lobbying on their behalf to government? We're also trying to make their lives easier by providing useful information".

Eibhlín praises the Society's staff and says that the work is very rewarding. "It's tough and it's stressful and you're worrying about money, but then you pick up the phone and you talk to someone and you're helping them. The Asthma Society is such a challenge, it's brilliant. It's got nothing but good to offer people and I am very excited about being here".

Before Eibhlín joined the Society she was working as a self-employed management communications consultant and studying at the Smurfit Business School for an MBA, which she has almost completed. "I started the MBA with the aim of becoming the CEO of a charity", says Eibhlín. "I've never worked in the private sector – my grá has always been with politics or voluntary groups".

At the moment Eibhlín is working on implementing the Society's five-year plan that was devised two years ago.

"I need to pin down our strategy and that involves bringing in members and their ideas – what they view as important to the future of the Asthma Society. I would like to see more members getting involved at the AGM. We need to be very focused. People here are so passionate about what we need to do, but we have to be realistic and to prioritise without becoming too complacent or cynical – there is a balance".

For World Asthma Day on May 3, the society chose the theme *Be in control* following the startling statistic revealed by the Global Initiative for Asthma that Ireland and the UK had the fourth highest prevalence of asthma in the world.

"A significant number of the 400,000 people with asthma in Ireland don't have their asthma controlled and that is an issue for us. It is important that people

realise that they can control their asthma and still have a life", says Eibhlín.

"And there is another issue that it's important to talk about – 80-100 people die from an asthma-related attack every year in Ireland. This is very high when you think that around 400 people die from road accidents – and think of the money spent on road traffic safety campaigns.

"In just one week I spoke to two people whose relative had died from asthma. So good asthma control is very important – and making people aware about control is the big challenge".

The Society's helpline run by asthma nurse specialists is one of the key ways it helps people to get the information they need to control their asthma.

"People often leave their GP surgery or hospital clinic having forgotten to ask some questions. They ring the helpline for answers to questions like: Can I run with asthma? How do I help other people with asthma? My relative died last week who can I talk to?" Eibhlín also hopes to raise funds to provide a bereavement counsellor.

The Health Service Executive, the Health Promotion Unit and other government departments could benefit by making use of the Society's knowledge and experience, says Eibhlín.

### Advocacy

"We need to focus on the whole advocacy side of the charity. It's about working with other organisations and linking up to develop strong relationships with the Health Promotion Unit, the Departments of Education and of Health. We represent people with asthma in Ireland and that is our focus – what should we do to help people with asthma – and we also need to raise awareness that we exist.

"We're the ones with the expert knowledge – we have a team of people on our medical committee who are leading respiratory consultants in the country. We also have a bank of asthma nurses who have worked with us for 10-15 years and logged all the helpline calls to them and what the issues were".

The Society hopes to work with the Departments of Health and Education to introduce an asthma schools policy to all 4,000 national schools in September.

The Asthma Society has about 2,000 members around the country and it aims to expand its support groups nationwide.

"We offer our members a service that complements the service get in the hospitals", says Eibhlín. "We help them get through their asthma and provide help along the way. Membership costs very little – €15 a year [€20 for families]. And of course if someone phones us who is not a member we will still help them, but members get the added benefit of all our literature and our magazine free.

"When you're a charity you do have to keep thinking about costs. Non-members are sometimes surprised they have to pay for our literature but when people realise that the Society is a charity they are very generous".

On World Asthma Day the Society sells its pin badges in pharmacies, banks, credit unions and on the streets.

"We do get a small amount of money from one of the health boards (HSE sections), and we sometimes get funding for particular projects from the pharmaceutical companies".

The Society's core funding comes from membership fees, selling lottery tickets on the street, selling badges and donations.

"Part of my job is to look at how we can bring in more funds because we really want to spend some money on research. We want to find out: why does Ireland have the fourth-highest rate of asthma in the world? And why do one in five children in Ireland have asthma when they don't in other countries?"

Eibhlín would also like to get answers to questions like:

- Who has asthma?
- What part of the country do they live in?
- What time of the year is asthma more prevalent?

This summer, a US research student will be helping the Society to analyse the data it has gathered from phone calls to its helpline over the years.

For the future, Eibhlín says: "We will take every opportunity we can get to highlight the issues about asthma, about the Society and what we do. I'm not going to let lack of resources stop me from trying to achieve our goals".