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Just what will the new year bring us?



AS WE approach the end of 2014, the fifth consecutive year of austerity, contraction and cutbacks, we are entitled to wonder what 2015 will bring for us, as nurses, midwives, public servants and citizens.

If we begin by attempting to be positive, 2015 promises a stabilisation of the health budget (at a very low level), a slight reduction in taxation leading to a marginal increase in take-home pay, and the probability of discussions, with government, in our demand for restoration of pay cuts and reduced working hours. However, any positive feelings must be tempered by the likelihood that any proposals from government or public service management will be marginal and inadequate.

A further positive in the 2015 Service Plan is the effective lifting of the recruitment moratorium and the commitment to increase the number of nurses/midwives in 2015. This, however belated, is very welcome, particularly as we face competition from the NHS, which is seeking to recruit 12,000 nurses immediately.

If we look at the negatives – and this is undoubtedly dominating households – 2015 also promises further attacks on living standards. If we look outside the health service, we will have new water charges, the possibility that the local property tax will increase as house values rise, and probable increases in utility charges. These will erode any increase in take-home pay resulting from a marginal reduction in taxation.

In relation to the health service budget and service plan for 2015, these offer, at best, the continuation of service at 2014 levels. As we all know, this has been wholly inadequate and has resulted in a severe increase in overcrowding, waiting times and contractions of community-based services. The latest trolley watch figures, for November, covered on *page 10*, make for stark reading for those who formulate and implement policy for our health service. The increase in overcrowding, resulting in over 7,000 admitted patients being left on trolleys in November, cannot be ignored and cannot be corrected by high level reviews, strategies or working groups. A significant increase in funding, sustained over an extended period, that allows closed beds to be open, community services to

be restored and additional staff to be recruited is required.

The challenge, which I believe has been underestimated by policy makers and the HSE, is where we will find the additional nurses/midwives required to restore safe staffing levels right across our services. There has been a complete underestimation of the brain drain within nursing and midwifery. It will not be possible to simply reverse this in the short-term.

The new year will also see the Taskforce on Nurse Staffing and Skill Mix, established last September, issue its first report to the Minister. This report has the potential to bring forward evidence that supports a level of minimum staffing required to optimise patient care in an environment conducive to best nursing practice. The implementation of this report will be a key measure of the Minister's recognition that the current nursing workforce is not optimal and care is being compromised. A separate report, on midwifery staffing, is also due in 2015. This must also lead to additional midwives being employed, in order to meet the Birthrate Plus standard.

While nurses/midwives are overworked and demoralised, now more than ever, we must remain united and solid. This will ensure that we can extract, from 2015, every single resource possible, both as citizens and health professionals, to improve our lives at home and at work. This is our challenge and I believe we are equal to it.

On behalf of the president, Executive Council and staff can I take this opportunity to wish each and every member, and your loved ones, a happy and peaceful Christmas and may good health follow you throughout 2015.

Liam Doran
General Secretary, INMO