



# Finger on the pulse

**Joe Hoolan, new IRO for the Dublin South West Branch area, is well equipped for this challenging role. He spoke to Tara Horan**

FEW could be more in tune with the issues currently facing nurses and midwives in overcrowded and understaffed units across the country than newly-appointed IRO Joe Hoolan.

Joe is all too familiar with the scenarios he is now dealing with in his new position as INMO industrial relations officer for the Dublin South West Branch Area. Prior to his appointment, Joe was a CNM3 in the emergency department of the Midland Regional Hospital, Portlaoise.

"The issues I'm finding throughout the hospitals and units in my new area pretty much mirror what's going on throughout the country," said Joe. "The most pressing issue everywhere is the staffing moratorium, which has absolutely decimated clinical areas."

Joe has been an active member of the INMO for many years, including working as a hospital representative in Portlaoise and as chair of the Laois Branch. He was also previously an IRO with the union from 2006-08, during which time the INMO won its hard-fought for 37.5-hour working week. Joe was initially appointed as IRO for the midlands region and later moved to cover Dublin South/Kildare/West Wicklow.

Joe trained as an RGN in King's College Hospital, London in the 1990s. He

came back to Ireland in 1996 and took up a position in the emergency department of Beaumont Hospital, Dublin, where he worked until 2003. He then moved to Portlaoise in 2003.

"I became increasingly interested in the work of the INMO at that stage and was elected to the Executive Council in 2004 and sat on the INMO industrial relations sub-committee. After that it seemed a natural step to become an IRO," he said.

However, in 2008 Joe went back into the clinical field as a CNM3 in Portlaoise ED for personal reasons and also because he still had a yen for clinical work.

"I was fortunate to work with an exceptional bunch of nurses there. However, my interest in union work continued and I completed a postgraduate diploma in industrial relations in those years as I always wanted to come back to the INMO full time if the opportunity arose – it's just my thing. Even when I went back to Portlaoise I was the hospital rep there for the INMO, which was unusual at CNM3 level. I was lucky enough this year that a post became available," said Joe.

Following his appointment, Joe started back in INMO HQ at the end of August. While he finds many of the issues unchanged, the clinical area is certainly not the same as it was six or seven years

ago. "There's a huge amount of concern among nurses and midwives in relation to the clinical environment – the staffing moratorium, standards and patient safety," he said.

"Nurses and midwives you meet on a day-to-day basis are worried for their own clinical practice, their own professional registration and for the patient. So that's what I'll be concentrating on, as well as all the other end of my work on rights and entitlements, terms and conditions.

### Workplace risks

"The majority of issues coming towards me are those about clinical patient safety. This is due to inadequate staffing levels versus the volume of patients on the ward, overcrowded EDs and managements' expectations that nurses will ignore those risks and just plough on. But thankfully our profession is one that has a voice and they are coming to us with those issues and we are actively addressing them as they arise," he said.

The main issues in Dublin South West Branch currently include:

- Concerns about overcrowding in St James's Hospital ED
- Staffing levels in a number of units
- The ignoring of hospital protocols by hospital management, which poses a patient safety risk
- The chief concern is the actual moratorium and the staffing levels that exist in units everywhere, be they in maternity hospitals, general hospitals, community hospitals
- In the community the main concern is the HSE's determination to achieve a 40:60 ratio (nurse: HCAs) at the expense of patient safety and patient care.

"That's an issue that we're actively resisting at the moment. Currently the ratio is 60:40 and the move is purely an accounting exercise and has nothing to do with patient safety. Some managers would privately tell you that they are as concerned as we are but there is a corporate HSE strategy here to drive standards to the bottom in these areas," said Joe.

Joe is originally from Tipperary, near the Offaly border, and now lives in Co Kilkenny. He is married to Gemma, a nurse working in Portlaoise, and has three young children.

August was an exceptionally busy month for the family – besides Joe's new job, they moved house and welcomed a new baby. If he could survive that, the Dublin South West Branch is in extremely capable hands.