



# Sharpen up on safety

The implementation of the EU sharps directive in Ireland has been less than satisfactory and must be addressed, writes **Emer Costello**

THE deputy general secretary of the INMO, Dave Hughes, has stressed the importance of nurses and midwives lobbying candidates for the European Union elections to review Ireland's implementation of the sharps directive.

The implementation of the directive by statutory instrument under the EU Act was described by Mr Hughes as less than adequate. He condemned the fact that Irish law now allows for recapping of needles in some circumstances and identified other difficulties with the legislation. For example, enforceability is dependent on inspectors rather than an employee procedure for making complaints, as is the case under the Health and Safety Act. Also, the definition of 'employer', to whom the legislation is applicable, is ambiguous.

According to Mr Hughes, the INMO is very disappointed with how the EU directive has been treated by the Irish government. The INMO invested a great deal of work into the directive, so it is frustrating that the government was in breach of the deadline for its implementation, and has loosely applied the directive with regard to the recapping of needles.

Mr Hughes raised this issue with MEP Emer Costello, who has committed to pursue an assessment of the application of the directive in Ireland. Her letter of reply, said:

*"It must have been a frustrating experience. The implementation came almost 10 months after the EU deadline and the form of implementation chosen by Irish officials was convoluted to say the least. Nevertheless, the entire process demonstrates the*

*importance of effective trade unions working at both European and Irish levels to win health and safety and other protections. So much of our health and safety law comes from Brussels and – notwithstanding the difficulties that often seem to dog the process of Irish implementation of EU directives – the sharps directive demonstrates that European legislation is still vital in protecting health workers' rights and safety.*

*"I have asked the European Commission to assess Ireland's implementation of the sharps directive and to spell out what action it will take to ensure its full and correct implementation.*

*"It's incredible to me that basic rights to a safe and healthy workplace are now being questioned by many in business and politics, here and across the continent. I frequently hear industry lobbyists arguing for weaker workplace protections. This mood is gathering pace in the corridors of European power, where some are happy to accept the argument that effective safeguards like the sharps directive are nothing more than administrative burdens on management and business.*

*This demonstrates the growing need for effective trade unions, working with MEPs who respect health staff and understand the realities of working life in hospitals and elsewhere, if we want to maintain and keep improving the vital health and safety protections that Europe has delivered.*

*"In the European Parliament last September, I quizzed the EU commissioner responsible for workplace safety about unacceptable delays in implementing and introducing a new EU health and safety*

*strategy, which was supposed to be in place last year. The delay occurs at a time when over 5,000 tragic deaths occur in European workplaces each year.*

*"In Ireland, 47 people died at work last year. Meanwhile, the number of workplace inspections carried out by the Health and Safety Authority (HSA) is falling. HSA chairperson Michael Horgan warned last year that the continuing loss of HSA staff will lead to a reduction in standards and an increase in workplace injuries and costs.*

*"The sharps directive shows how action at European level can deliver practical help. That's why there's an urgent need for a new EU health and safety strategy. Apart from its practical effect, it would send a message that the EU values the safety of its people and communities ahead of the convenience of powerful corporations who would happily use the economic crisis to erode vital workplace safety protections.*

*"Last year the European Commission launched a consultation on the proposed new strategy. Unions and their federations in Europe are using the opportunity to make the case for strengthened workplace safety measures. You can be sure that those who write off modern safety procedures as 'red tape' are doing the same.*

*"I know that the INMO will continue to work for improved rights to compensation, vaccination and counselling if a nurse or midwife suffers a sharps injury. The union needs an effective voice in the European Parliament and other EU institutions to help in this important work."*

**Emer Costello is member of the European Parliament for Dublin**