



Tensions rise as reports back health reform plan

by **Caroline O'Doherty, Mary Dundon and Fionnán Sheahan**

A SCATHING report detailing financial mismanagement by health boards, to be presented to Cabinet today, will back up the Government's plan for a radical reform of the health service.

As health board management and local politicians prepare to oppose plans to scrap the country's 10 health boards, a report commissioned by the Department of Finance will outline how the system has squandered millions of euro of taxpayers' money.

This morning, Minister for Health Micheál Martin and Minister for Finance Charlie McCreevy will seek the backing of the Cabinet for the biggest reform of the health service in 30 years.

Their proposals are based on two reports due to be published with the Government action plan tomorrow.

The Prospectus Report into health service structures calls for less bureaucracy and greater accountability in a slimmed down service.

And the Brennan Report into value for money in the health service will clearly illustrate the blatant lack of accountability in financial management. The report, commissioned by the Department of Finance, also has a series of recommendations on budgetary regulation.

As the reports are to be published in full tomorrow, the Government will be under pressure to show it is committed to acting upon the recommendations.

Fianna Fáil backbenchers will intensify their pressure on Mr Martin next week to give local councillors a place on the four health agencies and bodies set to replace the 10 health boards.

Oireachtas Health Committee chairman Batt O'Keeffe believes local councillors must have a place on the new health bodies to fight the corner of hospitals threatened with downgrading.

"Otherwise we will just have medical professionals sitting on these boards and they will, no doubt be pushing their own interests," Mr O'Keeffe said.

recommendations before the Cabinet represent a magic wand for the tens of thousands of patients languishing on hospital waiting lists.

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A motion tabled by Senators Marc MacSharry and Eamon Scanlon demanding local politicians be retained on regional health agencies will be discussed at next week's meeting of the FF parliamentary party.

"We want the minister to tell us why he wants to remove politicians from these bodies. We believe it is vital to keep them there to fight for local hospitals that are threatened with downgrading," Mr MacSharry said.

Meanwhile, two of the largest health workers' unions warned they expect to be consulted every step of the way about changes affecting their members.

IMPACT, which represents 10,000 health board managers and administrative staff, said there had been a deliberate attempt to create a smokescreen around the problems in the health services by focusing attention on apparent inefficiencies in administration.

IMPACT national secretary Kevin Callinan said there is no justification for targeting administrative jobs for cuts.

He also questioned the logic of unveiling the reports without waiting for a third study, the Hanley Report by the National Task Force on Medical Staffing, which will call for major changes to the working arrangements of consultants and junior doctors.

The Irish Medical Organisation is awaiting the Hanley Report with some apprehension and warned any aspect of today's reports that had implications for its membership would also have to be negotiated.

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It is doubtful that the