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COMMENT: An open letter to Minister for Health Simon Harris

Monday, 29th August, 2016 7:59am

ON August 14 I had the privilege of climbing Croagh Patrick with a wonderful group of people in an effort to raise awareness for a project aimed at helping those suffering with a severe Acquired Brain Injury.



Terence Flanagan (front row, right) pictured with members of An Saol at Croagh Patrick.

An Saol is a pilot project that has been developed with the help of Irish and German experts which proposes the setting up of a unit with high-dependency capability and specialist medical staff. Under this proposal no extra funding is required at this stage. It just requires the approval of the Minister for Health.

During the climb I met with families whose loved ones have been affected by severe Acquired Brain Injuries (SABI) and their stories were all very similar to mine in relation to the lack of supports. We shared stories of that split second event that changed lives forever and the utter frustration with the health service as it had not just spectacularly failed their loved one, but had written them off.

There are only three beds in the National Rehabilitation Hospital and patients get three months' rehabilitation regardless of their injury. Sometimes people can stay a little longer, but not as a rule.

As a result families are left with no other choice but to leave loved ones with SABI in nursing homes where most residents are in their 80s.

There are no facilities to help a person with severe Acquired Brain Injury in this country reach their full potential and a level of independence. There is not enough physiotherapy, occupational or speech therapy provided.

Through the An Saol project, families are coming together to help bring about change.

One such family challenging the current status quo and showing huge determination to bring positive change is Reinhard and Pat Schaler.

In 2013, their young son Pádraig was hit by a van as he cycled to work. They were horrified to discover that he would have to wait a year in an acute hospital in Dublin before getting one of the three high-dependency beds in the National Rehabilitation Hospital and at that his care there would be limited to only three months.

As a result, Reinhard and Pat moved Pádraig to Germany where he received intensive physio and support, something which the Irish health service could not provide. They have been travelling back and forth to Germany ever since to avail of this care.

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An Saol was set up with a view to raising awareness around the lack of services for people with brain injuries, to highlight the inadequacy of what is available and to work with the HSE to push for improvement in all areas of their care. Unfortunately, within our ailing and failing health system, the care of those with SABI is yet another area where inadequate services need to be highlighted.

For more information, visit www.ansaol.ie or follow on Twitter (@an_saol)

• **Terence Flanagan is a former TD for Dublin North East and a supporter of ansaol.ie**

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