



# Cutbacks hit homeless

**Nick O'Donoghue**

Ireland's homeless population is likely to be the worst hit by HSE cutbacks and any increases in emergency department (ED) fees, according to an inner-city GP.

North Dublin GP Dr Austin O'Carroll said that homeless people and members of the travelling community were being excluded from the healthcare system because they were unable to get medical cards and could not afford the cost of going to a GP or an ED.

Dr O'Carroll added that the lack of GPs in deprived parts of inner-city Dublin was another barrier blocking access to primary care for many, with several GPs closing their lists because of the number of patients they already have.

"Excluded groups won't make access to the health system. In order to get a medical card you have to have an address [which means homeless people cannot get one].

"The fear is the people at the bottom [of the economic ladder] are going to lose out. Homeless people won't get up and complain about the service," he said.

Highlighting the need for improved medical services for people living on the streets, Dr O'Carroll told *IMN* that Safetynet, a medical service that goes to homeless shelters and halting sites, sees more than 650



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patients a week. He added that deprived inner-city areas of all major cities in the country would continue to struggle to meet the demand for healthcare services unless GPs were encouraged to establish themselves in those areas. As private investors, Dr O'Carroll stressed, new GPs would be unable to afford the cost of setting up a practice unless the HSE set up primary care units. He told *IMN* an attempt to encourage trainee GPs to come into deprived areas by setting up a GP training scheme was blocked last year when funding was withdrawn at the last minute.

"I had a proposal to set up a training scheme for doctors to work in deprived areas, but funding for that was pulled in November 2007, when we were putting the ads for it in the paper," Dr O'Carroll said. His concerns come as the Simon Community highlighted worrying trends showing increasing demand for emergency shelters and greater numbers of people sleeping on the streets.