

# CHILD-FRIENDLY HEALTHCARE

A REPORT COMMISSIONED BY  
THE OMBUDSMAN FOR CHILDREN  
*EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*

**Prof Ursula Kilkelly**, Faculty of Law, UCC &

**Prof Eileen Savage**, School of Nursing and Midwifery, UCC

November 2013

• the right to a name  
and nationality

• the right to practise  
their religion

• the right to get information



**ucc**  
University College Cork

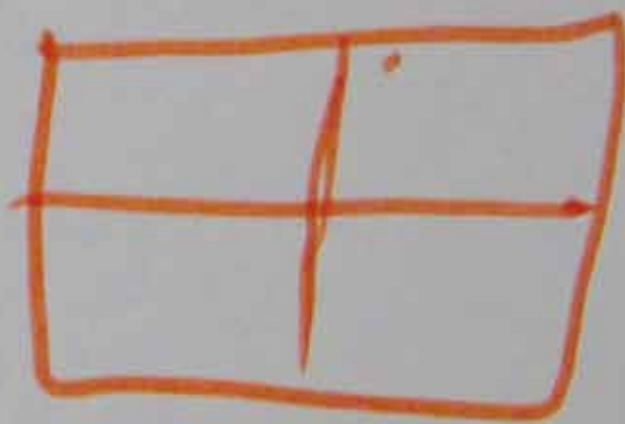


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hospital



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being take seriously

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When I go to the  
doctor I would like  
them to take me  
seriously.



The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms that children have the right to the highest attainable standard of health and the right to equitable access to quality healthcare services that meet their needs. Children's rights must be protected when they come into contact with the healthcare system and the healthcare system should be organised so as to protect the core principles of dignity, children's participation and regard for the best interests of the child. Child-friendly healthcare aims to integrate the rights of children into healthcare policy, the delivery of services and the treatment of children in various healthcare settings. According to the Council of Europe Guidelines on Child-friendly Healthcare, child-friendly healthcare is informed by a commitment to children's rights to good health and healthcare, to respect for their dignity as individuals in their own right, and for their right to have a say about how they are treated both medically and by the healthcare service as a whole. Child-friendly healthcare demands an awareness of children's different stages of development and it requires sensitivity to the important role played by the child's family as they come into contact with various parts of the healthcare system. Ensuring children's rights are protected in the healthcare system is necessary to comply with international standards and it helps to ensure adherence to international good practice on the provision of healthcare to children. Given that all children will come into contact with the healthcare system at some point, focusing on children's rights in healthcare presents a clear opportunity to ensure respect for children's rights in their everyday lives. Ensuring that this experience is a positive one, where the child feels respected and listened to, where his/her needs are met and he/she feels supported, will serve to underpin respect for children's rights more generally. Protecting the rights of children in the healthcare setting means not only that they receive treatment that makes them better or improves the quality of their lives; it also means that their broader needs, as children, are met throughout that process. In this way, healthcare that is child-friendly is better healthcare for children.

This report is the result of a desk-based study undertaken at University College Cork for the Ombudsman for Children. It is designed to bring together all of the available evidence concerning the promotion and protection of children's rights in healthcare. More generally, the study identifies the actions necessary to develop and sustain a children's rights culture in healthcare settings.

## International Children's Rights Standards

An analysis of international standards on children's rights shows that a number of elements are necessary to achieve child-friendly healthcare:

- A clear national policy framework for children's healthcare is necessary to ensure that healthcare policy and the organisation and delivery of health services recognise the importance of children's rights in healthcare and promote the best interests of children individually and collectively in all actions that affect them;
- Awareness raising and training about the merits of child-friendly healthcare is needed among healthcare professionals, managers and policy-makers;
- Mainstreaming of the child-friendly approach is necessary to ensure that all healthcare professionals, and not only those who work exclusively with children or in paediatric settings, are engaged with child-friendly healthcare;
- Parents need to be supported to assist children to access healthcare and participate fully in the healthcare process;
- Awareness raising of child-friendly healthcare among parents/carers as well as children themselves is essential.

## Children's Experiences of Healthcare: A Review of Research

International and Irish studies have identified the extent to which children's rights are protected and promoted in healthcare settings. Most of this research has focused on children's participation in healthcare decision-making and has highlighted the importance of information, communication and a child-friendly environment. Children want information about their healthcare that they can understand and they want health professionals who are able to communicate with them in a child-friendly manner.

Although few studies have examined children's experiences of the healthcare system, what research has been done indicates that the following are important to children: service organisation and access; holistic care services (including emotional and social care and not just physical aspects of care); staffing (qualifications and communication style); and environment. With respect to service organisation and access, children want accessible, flexible and integrated services that allow for



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continuity of care. Children want to have a say in the way services are organised, and in relation to the process of delivering care. The provision of information and shared decision-making have also been identified as important.

Research indicates that practice in Ireland remains very mixed. Children's positive experiences are mainly of those professionals who have specialised training or experience in children's healthcare. The majority of children will not encounter these specialists and will more commonly be seen by general practitioners in primary and secondary care who may or may not have the requisite skills, experience or competencies to ensure that the approach is child-friendly. Research shows that good practice is beginning to emerge in relation to how to engage with children in healthcare and these practices are beginning to be incorporated into education and training. However, this needs to be undertaken by healthcare professionals on an on-going basis if child-friendly healthcare is to be fully mainstreamed throughout the healthcare system.

Changing the practice of individual professionals will have limited impact on children's rights in healthcare unless it is part of a systems-wide programme of cultural change. Promoting leadership and supporting the champions of the child-friendly approach to healthcare are both key to successfully changing organisational culture. In practice, this can be complex and contested terrain, especially if such efforts come without a clear programme of action – derived from national child health policy - that is shared by all those (professionals, management, administrators and policy-makers) working with and for children in health services.

## The Law and Policy Framework for Children's Healthcare

To date, Irish law and policy has tended to focus on children's services generally or on children's health. There has been little to bridge the gap between these two areas and no national policy framework on children's healthcare has yet been adopted. In recent years, attention has focused almost exclusively on the development of the new national children's hospital. The review undertaken by the Paediatric and Neonatology Clinical Programme Leads (2013) highlighted the need to involve children and families in service development and planning. Although it concluded that the new National Children's Hospital should become a hub for paediatric care nationally, the review recommended that a national model of integrated care be developed to

avoid a 'magnet effect'. It supported the need to develop a National Service Framework for children and young people in Ireland.

There is no statutory framework to govern healthcare decision-making in children's cases although the National Consent Policy (2013) is a welcome recent development. Moreover, recent focus in the HSE on engagement with service users, including the adoption of the National Healthcare Charter, highlight a commitment to ensure that healthcare services respond to users' needs. They reflect a partnership approach to healthcare based on equitable access, participation in healthcare decision-making and respect for autonomy and dignity – all principles found in the children's rights approach. Significantly, a National Healthcare Charter for Children has been developed in line with a child-centred and child-rights approach to children's healthcare. The Charter has potential to influence the extent to which healthcare services operate in line with children's rights standards and could, if the commitment of resources, training and awareness raising materialises, represent a significant advance towards child-friendly healthcare in Ireland.

## Monitoring Children's Rights in Healthcare: Models of Good Practice

The research identified models of good practice that could assist Ireland to promote child-friendly healthcare. One international model (i.e. rolled out across a number of countries) was examined, and a number of models being implemented in individual countries (Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Scotland) were also included as examples of practice initiatives available to healthcare professionals, service managers, policy makers and others for application in child healthcare settings. These included a self-assessment tool for use in hospitals designed to monitor children's rights in practice; a national Charter and associated audit tool for evaluating and measuring progress in the implementation of its standards in children's healthcare; and awareness raising and resource packs to increase understanding of the importance of the child-friendly approach to healthcare. In summary, these models identify the following as critical 'building blocks' for child-friendly healthcare: building inter-sectoral alliances; raising awareness of children's rights in healthcare; undertaking situational analyses of current practices; developing and implementing standards on the rights of children in healthcare settings; and the active support of health sector management. Leadership is a vital pillar to support

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these 'building blocks'. Lastly, and most importantly, hearing the views and experiences of children and using them as the basis for action is what matters most to progressing and realising a vision for respecting children's rights in healthcare settings.

## Conclusions and Next Steps

Taking into account all of this evidence, a number of steps are necessary to promote healthcare that is child-friendly and rights-compliant in Ireland. They are:

- The development of national policy on child-friendly healthcare;
- Building inter-sectoral alliances;
- Awareness raising about children's rights in healthcare, including education and training of healthcare professionals;
- Situational analysis of current practices;
- Standards on the rights of children in healthcare settings;
- Leadership;
- Management support;
- Listening and responding to children.

Many of these steps are getting underway in Ireland. With this awareness and commitment, there is now a unique opportunity available to policy makers, healthcare professionals and all the stakeholders in the children's healthcare system, including children and their families, to ensure that Ireland is at the forefront in putting children's rights into practice in healthcare.





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