ARRIVING AT THE Pearse Street Medical Centre in Dublin’s inner city on a dull, damp, summer morning, I am pleased to enter the friendly atmosphere and banter of local ‘Pearsonians’ who are already waiting at reception. There are no appointments here, just a walk in and wait system which works well for most.

“We did try an appointment system”, says practice owner Niall O’Cleirigh, “but it didn’t work because patients were too used to the older system. Many patients are part of generations of families who have been attending the practice and have always been able to just walk-in to see the doctor whenever necessary. It is easier to have an appointment-based system when you start from a green field site”.

However, he does recognise its merits and the practice manager, Niall’s sister Maeve Ní Cleirigh, who has been working full time at the practice for the past year, plans to look at introducing some appointments in the near future.

Family tradition

General practice is in Niall’s blood, as his father was also a GP. Sean O’Cleirigh was a Dublin man but moved to Spiddal, in county Galway, as “the tradition in those days was to begin an apprenticeship in the west and move east in time.”

“To say the least he had a grá for the Irish language”, says Niall who adds that he and his nine siblings are all Irish speakers. For his part Niall hasn’t lost his love of the language and all three of his children attend an Irish-speaking school or gael scoil. “It’s not so easy to maintain the use of Irish in a city which has English as its first language”, says Niall. “At times it can be equally difficult to convince the children of the benefits”.

When Niall was aged 10 the family moved back to Dublin, where his father set up practice in Mount Street as a dispensary doctor and was also registrar for births, deaths and marriages, which was convenient as he was just a stone’s throw away from the largest maternity hospital in Europe, Holles Street. In 1970 the practice moved to Pearse Street.

Niall soon followed in his father’s footsteps and qualified from general practice training in 1981. He rented a practice in 1985 and in 1988 acquired an official GMS list. This coincided with his father Sean’s retirement. As Sean was district medical officer, “the premises came with the job”, so a new site had to be found and consequently in 1988 Niall bought the premises at Pearse Street, which comprises a surgery, treatment room and reception/waiting area.

Single-handed practice

Niall is a single-handed GP, but stresses that this is “not by choice”. He does, however, employ an assistant GP, Hugh Tinsey, to cover Wednesday surgery, when Niall carries out other primary care-related interests (see below).

Plans are afoot however to establish a bigger medical centre for the general area, incorporating the three GPs in the vicinity. This future project relies on funding, and the GPs are currently in the process of negotiations with the Baggot Street Trust fund for monies to allow the centre to be realised. “Hopefully the three of us will get together, if not in partnership then a three-way group practice”, says Niall, adding that ideally a new premises should be on one level to facilitate elderly patients and mothers with young children.
Approximately 90% of patients attending the practice have medical cards, according to Niall. The private practice has increased somewhat in recent years with some professionals moving into the new apartments in the area.

Services

On-site services available at the practice include cryotherapy, smear tests, primary prevention in cardiac care, including 24 hour blood pressure monitoring, and ECGs. Among the most recent developments is the practice’s participation in the Heartwatch programme, which focuses on secondary prevention in CVD and involves the continuing care of patients with a history of MI, CABG or PTCA. A key element of the programme is the return of information electronically to a central ‘databank’ which the practice is equipped for as it is fully computerised.

The Diabetes Shared Care Scheme is another initiative the practice participates in and one which Niall was heavily involved in setting up.

Another service that patients at the practice benefit greatly from is the South Inner City Partnership (SICP). Set up in the mid 1990s it has been highly successful in the reorganisation of services in the Dublin’s south inner city, namely direct referral, according to Niall.

GP referral

For some clinical procedures, Niall refers to other GPs. For instance although he has carried out his own minor surgery at the practice, he now refers patients to the GP-led minor surgery clinic held fortnightly in Baggot Street Hospital, set up recently by GPs Tony O’Sullivan and Nick Breen.

“The advantage of this type of service is its efficiency, so rather than a GP ups skuiling to carry out only a few procedures per month or per year you refer to a specialist clinic”, says Niall.

“As far as I know this is the only clinic of its kind in the country and works very well with GPs referring to GPs”.

Through his involvement with the GP unit of the East Coast Area Health Board, which has a remit to develop primary care in the long-term, Niall fields queries/problems from fellow GPs. The GP unit comprises 60-70 GPs covering a geographical area from Donnybrook to Stillorgan. “Initially queries mainly concerned particular issues such as the indicative drug budgeting, now however the focus is more on strategic planning for the future”, he says. In the pipeline are plans for joint injection and Mirena coil insertion clinics.

Urban deprivation

As an inner city GP, much of surgery time is taken up with the care the poverty related illnesses such as drug and alcohol abuse. “We have a huge opiate problem in the area and were involved with methadone prescribing long before the methadone protocol came along,” says Niall. The practice is now level II approved. The National Treatment Centre is located nearby in Trinity Court.

Care of asylum seekers is another busy part of practice activities. Both the Refugee Appeals Board and Asylum Seekers Service for Minors are located a short distance away.

“There is beaten path to the practice door with 10-15 asylum seekers presenting a day,” says Niall who often sees these patients even before they have been ‘processed’ with a medical card, as they often are in need of immediate medical attention.

Out of hours

Out of hours care at the practice is organised through the Eastdoc co-operative which Niall was heavily involved in setting up.

Vaccination

Practice nurse, Mary Reville, who works part time at the practice, puts a huge amount of time and effort into vaccinations and has achieved a 95% uptake rate at the practice.

“In an area which in general does not have a high uptake it shows that you can achieve it even within a deprived area”, says Niall. This uptake rate is achieved through a very structured system which includes regular reminders.

“If people still don’t appear their charts are stamped as ‘defaulter’ and a more vigorous follow-up is initiated.”

In fact it is not unusual for Niall to carry out a house call in order to vaccinate a child.

“The task is slightly more difficult with refugees because they move around a lot and after they are relocated we cannot find them. They are however conscious of vaccination and ask about it”.

College commitments

Another area of interest is in College affairs and Niall recently took up the reigns of chairman of the ICGP Communications and Publications Subcommittee which involves liaising with the media and updating and reproducing College publications and clinical guidelines.

Niall is no stranger to College activities. He is a past MICGP examiner, was a member of the original committee which set up the OSCE component of the MICGP exam and was responsible for setting up the MICGP preparatory course.