



# **Clip Book**

**(September 28, 2023)**

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# Automatic medical card call

SPINAL Injuries Ireland has published a pre-budget submission calling on the Government to automatically provide medical cards to 26 people from county Sligo who are living with a Spinal Cord Injury (SCI).

The organisation made the call as part of its pre-budget submission and also wants the Government to ensure that medical cards are provided to these 26 service users for a period of 10 years without review.

Spinal Injuries Ireland estimates that 700 people, or almost one third of its 2,200 service users, do not have a medical card despite those who sustain a Spinal Cord Injury being medically certified as having a lifelong condition that requires medical support.

It said that medical card holders in Sligo and other counties were living in fear of HSE reviews that could result in the loss of their medical card and that this fear had also become a barrier to them returning to the workforce and achieving the optimal outcome from their rehabilitation.

“The system for determining eligibility for medical cards is arbitrary and inhuman. It is delaying or denying treatment and the supply of necessary equipment to many people living with a Spinal Cord Injury, and it is also preventing them from returning to work,” said Fiona Bolger, CEO of Spinal Injuries Ireland.

“The current process of reviewing medical cards annually or once every three years has created a climate of fear and uncertainty. It is causing enormous distress and anxiety and it is making it extremely difficult for anyone with a Spinal Cord Injury to make long-term life plans,” she added.

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## SII calls for automatic **Medical cards** for 37 Louth people living with **Spinal Cord Injury**

**Spinal Injuries** Ireland has published a **Pre-Budget Submission** calling on the Government to automatically provide **Medical cards** to 37 people from county Louth who are living with a **Spinal Cord Injury (SCI)**.

The organisation made the call as part of its **Pre-Budget Submission** and also wants the Government to ensure that **Medical cards** are provided to these 37 service users for a period of 10 years without review.

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**Spinal Injuries** Ireland estimates that 700 people, or almost one third of its 2,200 service users, do not have a **Medical card** despite those who sustain a **Spinal Cord Injury** being medically certified as having a lifelong condition that requires medical support.

It said that **Medical card** holders in Louth and other counties were living in fear of HSE reviews that could result in the loss of their **Medical card** and that this fear had also become a barrier to them returning to the workforce and achieving the optimal outcome from their rehabilitation.

“The system for determining eligibility for **Medical cards** is arbitrary and inhuman. It is delaying or denying treatment and the supply of necessary equipment to many people living with a **Spinal Cord Injury**, and it is also preventing them from returning to work,” said **Fiona Bolger**, CEO of **Spinal Injuries** Ireland.

“The current process of reviewing **Medical cards** annually or once every three years has created a climate of fear and uncertainty. It is causing enormous distress and anxiety and it is making it extremely difficult for anyone with a **Spinal Cord Injury** to make long-term life plans,” she added.

“**Spinal Injuries** Ireland is calling on the Government to automatically provide **Medical cards** to people with a **Spinal Cord Injury** on the basis of their certified medical needs rather than their means and to extend the review cycle for **Medical card** holders with a **SCI** to ten years,” she continued.

The organisation said that people with a **Spinal Cord Injury** had to evaluate the potential loss of their **Medical card** when it came to pursuing employment opportunities because the weekly income thresholds for retaining the card were too low at €184 for a single person living alone, or €164 for a single person living with their family.

“Our research has found that up to 700 of our service users do not have a **Medical card**. This is a sobering statistic when you consider that the World Health Organisation (WHO) has described a **Spinal Cord Injury** as one of the most devastating and life changing injuries that a person can sustain,” said Ms. Bolger.

“54% of those we work with have been subject to a **Medical card** review. Young people, in particular, are living in fear of losing access to medical services if they return to work. They are choosing not to do so, or to only earn up to the income threshold, which impacts their opportunity to develop careers and to achieve social, psychological and intellectual fulfilment,” she added.

**Spinal Injuries** Ireland estimates that three people sustain a devastating **Spinal Cord Injury** every week in Ireland. Some lose the ability to walk and depending on the level of injury can also lose arm and hand function. A **SCI** can also result in serious secondary health issues including chronic pain, loss of body function, severe psychological distress, and financial issues.

The experience is life changing for individuals who are suddenly faced with the cost of medical care, bowel and bladder care and pressure relieving equipment along with specialist requirements such as a motorised chair, a bed hoist and having to adapt their car or home to their new reality.

“In many cases people with a **SCI** are unable to return to their former employment. Spouses, family members or partners commonly give up their employment to provide them with home care. There is a huge loss of family income, and it is estimated that 25% of those with a **SCI** live below the poverty line,” said Ms. Bolger.

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## SII calls for automatic **Medical cards** for 39 Mayo people living with **Spinal Cord Injury**

**Spinal Injuries Ireland** has published a **Pre-Budget Submission** calling on the government to automatically provide **Medical cards** to 39 people from Co. Mayo who are living with a **Spinal Cord Injury**.

The organisation made the call as part of its **Pre-Budget Submission** and also wants the government to ensure that **Medical cards** are provided to these 39 service users for a period of 10 years without review.

**Spinal Injuries Ireland (SII)** estimates that 700 people, or almost one third of its 2,200 service users, do not have a **Medical card** despite those who sustain a **Spinal Cord Injury** being medically certified as having a life-long condition that requires medical support.

It said that **Medical card** holders in Mayo and other counties were living in fear of HSE reviews that could result in the loss of their **Medical card**, and that this fear had also become a barrier to them returning to the workforce and achieving the optimal outcome from their rehabilitation.

“The system for determining eligibility for **Medical cards** is arbitrary and inhuman. It is delaying or denying treatment and the supply of necessary equipment to many people living with a **Spinal Cord Injury**, and it is also preventing them from returning to work,” said **Fiona Bolger**, CEO of **Spinal Injuries Ireland**.

“The current process of reviewing **Medical cards** annually or once every three years has created a climate of fear and uncertainty. It is causing enormous distress and anxiety, and it is making it extremely difficult for anyone with a **Spinal Cord Injury** to make long-term life plans.

“**Spinal Injuries Ireland** is calling on the government to automatically provide **Medical cards** to people with a **Spinal Cord Injury** on the basis of their certified medical needs rather than their means and to extend the review cycle for **Medical card** holders with a **Spinal Cord Injury** to 10 years.”

**SII** said that people with a **Spinal Cord Injury** had to evaluate the potential loss of their **Medical card** when it came to pursuing employment opportunities because the weekly income thresholds for retaining the card were too low at €184 for a single person living alone or €164 for a single person living with their family.

“Our research has found that up to 700 of our service users do not have a **Medical card**. This is a sobering statistic when you consider that the World Health Organisation (WHO) has described a **Spinal Cord Injury** as one of the most devastating and life-changing injuries that a person can sustain,” said Ms. Bolger.

“Fifty-four per cent of those we work with have been subject to a **Medical card** review. Young people, in particular, are living in fear of losing access to medical services if they return to work. They are choosing not to do so, or to only earn up to the income threshold, which impacts their opportunity to develop careers and to achieve social, psychological and intellectual fulfilment,” she added.

**SII** estimates that three people sustain a devastating **Spinal Cord Injury** every week in Ireland. Some lose the ability to walk and depending on the level of injury can also lose arm and hand function. A **Spinal Cord Injury** can also result in serious secondary health issues, including chronic pain, loss of body function, severe psychological distress and financial issues.

The experience is life-changing for individuals who are suddenly faced with the cost of medical care, bowel and bladder care, and pressure-relieving equipment along with specialist requirements such as a motorised chair, a bed hoist and having to adapt their car or home to their new reality.

“In many cases people with a **Spinal Cord Injury** are unable to return to their former employment. Spouses, family members or partners commonly give up their employment to provide them with home care. There is a huge loss of family income, and it is estimated that 25% of those with a **Spinal Cord Injury** live below the poverty line,” concluded Ms. Bolger.

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## Calls for automatic **Medical cards** for over 70 Clare people living with **Spinal Injuries**

**Spinal Injuries** Ireland has published a **Pre-Budget Submission** calling on the government to automatically provide **Medical cards** to over 70 people from County Clare who are living with a **Spinal Cord Injury**.

The organisation made the call as part of its **Pre-Budget Submission** and also wants the government to ensure that **Medical cards** are provided to the 73 service users for a period of 10 years, without review.

**Spinal Injuries** Ireland (SII) estimates that 700 people, or almost one third of its 2,200 service users, do not have a **Medical card** despite those who sustain a **Spinal Cord Injury (SCI)** being medically certified as having a lifelong condition that requires medical support.

It said that **Medical card** holders in Clare and other counties were living in fear of HSE reviews that could result in the loss of their **Medical card** and that this fear had also become a barrier to them returning to the workforce and achieving the optimal outcome from their rehabilitation.

“The system for determining eligibility for **Medical cards** is arbitrary and inhuman. It is delaying or denying treatment and the supply of necessary equipment to many people living with a **SCI**, and it is also preventing them from returning to work,” said **Fiona Bolger**, CEO of **Spinal Injuries** Ireland.

19 TDs & Senators attended & supported our briefing on **Medical cards** in Leinster House & offered to bring it to @DonnellyStephen We also met @AnneRabbitte who supports our submission. Thanks to all our service users who contacted their local TDS @Paschald @mmcgrathtd @HSELive pic.twitter.com/CGYezEXHfm

“The current process of reviewing **Medical cards** annually or once every three years has created a climate of fear and uncertainty. It is causing enormous distress and anxiety and it is making it extremely difficult for anyone with a **SCI** to make long-term life plans,” she added.

“**Spinal Injuries** Ireland is calling on the Government to automatically provide **Medical cards** to people with a **SCI** on the basis of their certified medical needs rather than their means and to extend the review cycle for **Medical card** holders with a **SCI** to ten years,” she continued.

SII briefed senators and TDs on the issue last week at Leinster House. Clare Senator Timmy Dooley arranged the briefing in Leinster House and also organised for SII representative Kieran Fitzgerald to meet with Minister of State for Disability Anne Rabbitte.

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## Calls for automatic **Medical cards** for over 70 Clare people living with **Spinal Injuries**

**Spinal Injuries** Ireland has published a **Pre-Budget Submission** calling on the government to automatically provide **Medical cards** to over 70 people from County Clare who are living with a **Spinal Cord Injury**.

The organisation made the call as part of its **Pre-Budget Submission** and also wants the government to ensure that **Medical cards** are provided to the 73 service users for a period of 10 years, without review.

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**Spinal Injuries** Ireland (**SII**) estimates that 700 people, or almost one third of its 2,200 service users, do not have a **Medical card** despite those who sustain a **Spinal Cord Injury (SCI)** being medically certified as having a lifelong condition that requires medical support.

It said that **Medical card** holders in Clare and other counties were living in fear of HSE reviews that could result in the loss of their **Medical card** and that this fear had also become a barrier to them returning to the workforce and achieving the optimal outcome from their rehabilitation.

“The system for determining eligibility for **Medical cards** is arbitrary and inhuman. It is delaying or denying treatment and the supply of necessary equipment to many people living with a **SCI**, and it is also preventing them from returning to work,” said **Fiona Bolger**, CEO of **Spinal Injuries** Ireland.

“The current process of reviewing **Medical cards** annually or once every three years has created a climate of fear and uncertainty. It is causing enormous distress and anxiety and it is making it extremely difficult for anyone with a **SCI** to make long-term life plans,” she added.

“**Spinal Injuries** Ireland is calling on the Government to automatically provide **Medical cards** to people with a **SCI** on the basis of their certified medical needs rather than their means and to extend the review cycle for **Medical card** holders with a **SCI** to ten years,” she continued.

**SII** briefed senators and TDs on the issue last week at Leinster House. Clare Senator Timmy Dooley arranged the briefing in Leinster House and also organised for **SII** representative Kieran Fitzgerald to meet with Minister of State for Disability Anne Rabbitte.

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## Spinal Injured should get guaranteed **Medical cards** | Kildare Nationalist

**Spinal Injuries** Ireland has published a **Pre-Budget Submission** calling on the Government to automatically provide **Medical cards** to 84 people from county Kildare who are living with a **Spinal Cord Injury (SCI)**.

The organisation made the call as part of its **Pre-Budget Submission** and also wants the Government to ensure that **Medical cards** are provided to these 84 service users for a period of 10 years without review.

**Spinal Injuries** Ireland estimates that 700 people nationwide, or almost one third of its 2,200 service users, do not have a **Medical card** despite those who sustain a **Spinal Cord Injury** being medically certified as having a lifelong condition that requires medical support.

It said that **Medical card** holders in Kildare and other counties were living in fear of HSE reviews that could result in the loss of their **Medical card** and that this fear had also become a barrier to them returning to the workforce and achieving the optimal outcome from their rehabilitation.

“The system for determining eligibility for **Medical cards** is arbitrary and inhuman. It is delaying or denying treatment and the supply of necessary equipment to many people living with a **Spinal Cord Injury**, and it is also preventing them from returning to work,” said **Fiona Bolger**, CEO of **Spinal Injuries** Ireland.


“The current process of reviewing **Medical cards** annually or once every three years has created a climate of fear and uncertainty. It is causing enormous distress and anxiety and it is making it extremely difficult for anyone with a **Spinal Cord Injury** to make long-term life plans,” she added.

“**Spinal Injuries** Ireland is calling on the Government to automatically provide **Medical cards** to people with a **Spinal Cord Injury** on the basis of their certified medical needs rather than their means and to extend the review cycle for **Medical card** holders with a **SCI** to ten years,” she continued.

The organisation said that people with a **Spinal Cord Injury** had to evaluate the potential loss of their **Medical card** when it came to pursuing employment opportunities because the weekly income thresholds for retaining the card were too low at €184 for a single person living alone, or €164 for a single person living with their family.

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## Calls for automatic **Medical cards** for 42 Kilkenny people living with **Spinal Cord Injury (SCI)**

**Spinal Injuries** Ireland has published a **Pre-Budget Submission** calling on the Government to automatically provide **Medical cards** to 42 people from county Kilkenny who are living with a **Spinal Cord Injury (SCI)**.

The organisation made the call as part of its **Pre-Budget Submission** and also wants the Government to ensure that **Medical cards** are provided to these 42 service users for a period of 10 years without review.

**Spinal Injuries** Ireland estimates that 700 people, or almost one third of its 2,200 service users, do not have a **Medical card** despite those who sustain a **Spinal Cord Injury** being medically certified as having a lifelong condition that requires medical support.

It said that **Medical card** holders in Kilkenny and other counties were living in fear of HSE reviews that could result in the loss of their **Medical card** and that this fear had also become a barrier to them returning to the workforce and achieving the optimal outcome from their rehabilitation.

“The system for determining eligibility for **Medical cards** is arbitrary and inhuman. It is delaying or denying treatment and the supply of necessary equipment to many people living with a **Spinal Cord Injury**, and it is also preventing them from returning to work,” said **Fiona Bolger**, CEO of **Spinal Injuries** Ireland.

“The current process of reviewing **Medical cards** annually or once every three years has created a climate of fear and uncertainty. It is causing enormous distress and anxiety and it is making it extremely difficult for anyone with a **Spinal Cord Injury** to make long-term life plans,” she added.

“**Spinal Injuries** Ireland is calling on the Government to automatically provide **Medical cards** to people with a **Spinal Cord Injury** on the basis of their certified medical needs rather than their means and to extend the review cycle for **Medical card** holders with a **SCI** to ten years,” she continued.

The organisation said that people with a **Spinal Cord Injury** had to evaluate the potential loss of their **Medical card** when it came to pursuing employment opportunities because the weekly income thresholds for retaining the card were too low at €184 for a single person living alone, or €164 for a single person living with their family.

“Our research has found that up to 700 of our service users do not have a **Medical card**. This is a sobering statistic when you consider that the World Health Organisation (WHO) has described a **Spinal Cord Injury** as one of the most devastating and life changing injuries that a person can sustain,” said Ms Bolger.

“54% of those we work with have been subject to a **Medical card** review. Young people, in particular, are living in fear of losing access to medical services if they return to work. They are choosing not to do so, or to only earn up to the income threshold, which impacts their opportunity to develop careers and to achieve social, psychological and intellectual fulfilment,” she added.

**Spinal Injuries** Ireland estimates that three people sustain a devastating **Spinal Cord Injury** every week in Ireland. Some lose the ability to walk and depending on the level of injury can also lose arm and hand function. A **SCI** can also result in serious secondary health issues including chronic pain, loss of body function, severe psychological distress, and financial issues.

The experience is life changing for individuals who are suddenly faced with the cost of medical care, bowel and bladder care and pressure relieving equipment along with specialist requirements such as a motorised chair, a bed hoist and having to adapt their car or home to their new reality.

“In many cases people with a **SCI** are unable to return to their former employment. Spouses, family members or partners commonly give up their employment to provide them with home care. There is a huge loss of family income, and it is estimated that 25% of those with a **SCI** live below the poverty line,” said Ms. Bolger.

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## Calls for automatic **Medical cards** for 42 Kilkenny people living with **Spinal Cord Injury (SCI)**

**Spinal Injuries** Ireland has published a **Pre-Budget Submission** calling on the Government to automatically provide **Medical cards** to 42 people from county Kilkenny who are living with a **Spinal Cord Injury (SCI)**.

The organisation made the call as part of its **Pre-Budget Submission** and also wants the Government to ensure that **Medical cards** are provided to these 42 service users for a period of 10 years without review.

**Spinal Injuries** Ireland estimates that 700 people, or almost one third of its 2,200 service users, do not have a **Medical card** despite those who sustain a **Spinal Cord Injury** being medically certified as having a lifelong condition that requires medical support.

It said that **Medical card** holders in Kilkenny and other counties were living in fear of HSE reviews that could result in the loss of their **Medical card** and that this fear had also become a barrier to them returning to the workforce and achieving the optimal outcome from their rehabilitation.

“The system for determining eligibility for **Medical cards** is arbitrary and inhuman. It is delaying or denying treatment and the supply of necessary equipment to many people living with a **Spinal Cord Injury**, and it is also preventing them from returning to work,” said **Fiona Bolger**, CEO of **Spinal Injuries** Ireland.

“The current process of reviewing **Medical cards** annually or once every three years has created a climate of fear and uncertainty. It is causing enormous distress and anxiety and it is making it extremely difficult for anyone with a **Spinal Cord Injury** to make long-term life plans,” she added.

“**Spinal Injuries** Ireland is calling on the Government to automatically provide **Medical cards** to people with a **Spinal Cord Injury** on the basis of their certified medical needs rather than their means and to extend the review cycle for **Medical card** holders with a **SCI** to ten years,” she continued.

The organisation said that people with a **Spinal Cord Injury** had to evaluate the potential loss of their **Medical card** when it came to pursuing employment opportunities because the weekly income thresholds for retaining the card were too low at €184 for a single person living alone, or €164 for a single person living with their family.

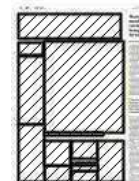
“Our research has found that up to 700 of our service users do not have a **Medical card**. This is a sobering statistic when you consider that the World Health Organisation (WHO) has described a **Spinal Cord Injury** as one of the most devastating and life changing injuries that a person can sustain,” said Ms Bolger.

“54% of those we work with have been subject to a **Medical card** review. Young people, in particular, are living in fear of losing access to medical services if they return to work. They are choosing not to do so, or to only earn up to the income threshold, which impacts their opportunity to develop careers and to achieve social, psychological and intellectual fulfilment,” she added.

**Spinal Injuries** Ireland estimates that three people sustain a devastating **Spinal Cord Injury** every week in Ireland. Some lose the ability to walk and depending on the level of injury can also lose arm and hand function. A **SCI** can also result in serious secondary health issues including chronic pain, loss of body function, severe psychological distress, and financial issues.

The experience is life changing for individuals who are suddenly faced with the cost of medical care, bowel and bladder care and pressure relieving equipment along with specialist requirements such as a motorised chair, a bed hoist and having to adapt their car or home to their new reality.

“In many cases people with a **SCI** are unable to return to their former employment. Spouses, family members or partners commonly give up their employment to provide them with home care. There is a huge loss of family income, and it is estimated that 25% of those with a **SCI** live below the poverty line,” said Ms. Bolger.



# People with spinal injuries ‘living in fear’ of losing medical cards, says ex-Gsoc commissioner Fitzgerald

EILISH O'REGAN



**F**ormer Garda Síochána Ombudsman commissioner and award-winning RTÉ reporter Kieran Fitzgerald, who suffered a life-changing accident which left him paralysed, has spoken of how people believe that if an injured person is back in a wheelchair they are “fine”.

“People look at the likes of me and they see a wheelchair. The reality for others and myself is the wheelchair is only part of it,” he said.

“It’s having to carry colostomy bags – that is more trouble on a daily basis. You are also on daily medications and subject to a lot of extra illnesses because you are sedentary and using catheters.

“People can believe that because you are in the wheelchair you are fine, but unfortunately that is not the case.”

Mr Fitzgerald is urging the Government to change the current system around the granting of a medical card to people with spinal injuries.

He was among a delegation from Spinal Injuries Ireland at Leinster House last week asking that the medical card be granted based on certified medical need rather than a means test.

The delegation also said people with spinal injuries who are currently above the income threshold and have a medical card on a discretionary basis are “living in fear” of reviews every year or three years.

They want to extend the review period to 10 years, to allow people who have suffered spinal injuries the time to plan and give them some reassurance they

will not face big medical bills.

Limerick native Mr Fitzgerald was familiar to RTÉ viewers for years when he worked on programmes such as *Prime Time* and *The Late Late Show*.

He went on to become a Garda Síochána Ombudsman commissioner, where he served two terms until 2021.

A sailing trip to Spain in 2016 turned to tragedy when he suffered a serious fall, leaving him in a medically induced coma for a month.

“I returned to the Mater Hospital in Dublin for three months and spent six months in the National Rehabilitation Hospital in Dún Laoghaire,” he said.

Now a wheelchair user, he has the use of his arms, though not all his fingers.

“Currently the provision of a medical card for people who have suffered life-long spinal injury is based on a means test. We are asking that be changed to medical need, which a consultant would certify,” Mr Fitzgerald said.

Many people are afraid that if they return to work and their income improves they will lose the card, he added.

“Those outside the means threshold may be given a discretionary card but this is reviewed within a year to three years.

“In some cases it might be automatically renewed and it arrives through the post, but in other cases people have to

produce accounts, bank statements, tax returns or any other sources of income.

“It is very stressful for people and the whole household can be taken into account.

“The bottom line is that people with spinal injuries have life-long conditions. They are not going to improve and they can deteriorate in that three years.

“If the review was moved to 10 years it would give them some certainty.”

A quarter of people with a spinal injury are living below the poverty line, according to Spinal Injuries Ireland.

Three people suffer a devastating spinal cord injury every week in Ireland.

They can face major costs for medical care, bowel and bladder supports, and pressure-relieving equipment, along with specialist requirements such as a motorised chair, a bed hoist or having to adapt their car or home.

Spinal Injuries Ireland chief execu-

tive Fiona Bolger said: “The system for determining eligibility for medical cards is arbitrary and inhuman. It is delaying or denying treatment and the supply of necessary equipment to many people living with a spinal cord injury.

“The current process of reviewing medical cards annually or once every three years has created a climate of fear and uncertainty.”

People with a spinal cord injury have to measure the potential loss of their medical card when looking for a job, as the weekly income threshold for retaining the card is just €184 for a single person living alone, or €164 for a single person living with their family.”

Ms Bolger pointed out that 700 members of the 2,200-strong Spinal Injuries Ireland do not have a medical card. “This is a sobering statistic when you consider that the World Health Organisation has described a spinal cord injury as one of the most devastating and life-changing injuries that a person can sustain,” she said. “Young people are living in fear of losing access to medical services if they return to work. They are choosing not to do so, or to only earn up to the income threshold, which impacts their opportunity to develop careers and to achieve social, psychological and intellectual fulfilment.”

*“The bottom line is that people with spinal injuries have life-long conditions. They won’t improve”*

Kieran Fitzgerald



**Former RTÉ reporter and Gsoc commissioner Kieran Fitzgerald.** Photo: Frank McGrath

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## People with **Spinal Injuries** ‘living in fear’ of losing **Medical cards**, says ex RTÉ journalist Kieran Fitzgerald

A quarter of people with a spinal injury living below the poverty line, according to **Spinal Injuries** Ireland Eilish O'Regan

Former Garda Síochána Ombudsman commissioner and award-winning RTÉ reporter Kieran Fitzgerald, who suffered a life-changing accident which left him paralysed, has spoken of how people believe that if an injured person is back in a wheelchair they are “fine”.

“People look at the likes of me and they see a wheelchair. The reality for others and myself is the wheelchair is only part of it,” he said.

“It’s having to carry colostomy bags – that is more trouble on a daily basis. You are also on daily medications and subject to a lot of extra illnesses because you are sedentary and using catheters.

“People can believe that because you are in the wheelchair you are fine, but unfortunately that is not the case.”

Mr Fitzgerald is urging the Government to change the current system around the granting of a **Medical card** to people with **Spinal Injuries**.

He was among a delegation from **Spinal Injuries** Ireland at Leinster House last week asking that the **Medical card** be granted based on certified medical need rather than a means test.

The delegation also said people with **Spinal Injuries** who are currently above the income threshold and have a **Medical card** on a discretionary basis are “living in fear” of reviews every year or three years.

They want to extend the review period to 10 years, to allow people who have suffered **Spinal Injuries** the time to plan and give them some reassurance they will not face big medical bills.

Limerick native Mr Fitzgerald was familiar to RTÉ viewers for years when he worked on programmes such as Prime Time and The Late Late Show

He went on to become a Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commissioner, where he served two terms until 2021.

A sailing trip to Spain in 2016 turned to tragedy when he suffered a serious fall, leaving him in a medically induced coma for a month.

“I returned to the Mater Hospital in Dublin for three months and spent six months in the National Rehabilitation Hospital in Dún Laoghaire,” he said.

Now a wheelchair user, he has the use of his arms, though not all his fingers.

People with **Spinal Injuries** have life-long conditions. They are not going to improve and they can deteriorate in that three years

“Currently the provision of a **Medical card** for people who have suffered life-long spinal injury is based on a means test. We are asking that be changed to medical need, which a consultant would certify,” Mr Fitzgerald said.

Many people are afraid that if they return to work and their income improves they will lose the card, he added.

“Those outside the means threshold may be given a discretionary card but this is reviewed within a year to three years.

“In some cases it might be automatically renewed and it arrives through the post, but in other cases people have to produce accounts, bank statements, tax returns or any other sources of income.

“It is very stressful for people and the whole household can be taken into account.

“The bottom line is that people with **Spinal Injuries** have life-long conditions. They are not going to improve and they can deteriorate in that three years.

“If the review was moved to 10 years it would give them some certainty.”

A quarter of people with a spinal injury are living below the poverty line, according to **Spinal Injuries** Ireland.

Three people suffer a devastating **Spinal Cord Injury** every **13** week in Ireland.

They can face major costs for medical care, bowel and bladder supports, and pressure-relieving equipment, along

with specialist requirements such as a motorised chair, a bed hoist or having to adapt their car or home.

The weekly income threshold for retaining the card is just €184 for a single person living alone

**Spinal Injuries** Ireland chief executive **Fiona Bolger** said: “The system for determining eligibility for **Medical cards** is arbitrary and inhuman. It is delaying or denying treatment and the supply of necessary equipment to many people living with a **Spinal Cord Injury**.

“The current process of reviewing **Medical cards** annually or once every three years has created a climate of fear and uncertainty.

“People with a **Spinal Cord Injury** have to measure the potential loss of their **Medical card** when looking for a job, as the weekly income threshold for retaining the card is just €184 for a single person living alone, or €164 for a single person living with their family.”

Ms Bolger pointed out that 700 members of the 2,200-strong **Spinal Injuries** Ireland do not have a **Medical card**.

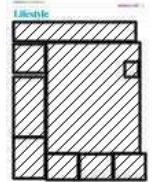
“This is a sobering statistic when you consider that the World Health Organisation has described a **Spinal Cord Injury** as one of the most devastating and life-changing injuries that a person can sustain,” she said.

“Young people are living in fear of losing access to medical services if they return to work.

“They are choosing not to do so, or to only earn up to the income threshold, which impacts their opportunity to develop careers and to achieve social, psychological and intellectual fulfilment.”

Caption:

Former RTÉ reporter and Gsoc commissioner Kieran Fitzgerald. Photo: Frank McGrath



# ‘How can I call this city mine if I can’t access so many parts of it?’

Jack Shannon Cole is an ambassador for A Day In My Wheels, a campaign aiming to help people understand what it’s like to experience places such as Dublin and Cork from a wheelchair, writes *Azmia Riaz*

**I** was out with friends in a pub over the weekend. It was grand but they didn’t have a disabled toilet, so anytime I needed to use the bathroom between pints, I had to push five minutes down the street to a McDonald’s and then I’d come back, have a pint or two and go back again,” says Jack Shannon Cole.

Cole (25) is pursuing a degree at the Institute of Banking in Dublin, represents Ireland in wheelchair basketball and works as a peer officer at Spinal Injuries Ireland (SII). After sustaining a spinal cord injury at the age of 15, he’s been working towards making life easier for others who are going through the same.

This year, he is one of the ambassadors for SII’s A Day In My Wheels campaign. Organised in Dublin on September 27 and Cork on October 4, the campaign aims to raise €100,000 to provide essential support to 2,300 people in Ireland living with spinal cord injuries. On the day, people can team up with an ambassador to experience the challenges wheelchair users face, like returning to work with a spinal cord injury, mental health struggles and medical expenses.

“The environment around us isn’t tailored for us, so we just have to make do,” says Cole. “There’s a lot of problem-solving and planning ahead — whether it’s going to get groceries, going down curbs or making your way into tiny bathrooms — it can be quite a push. It’s hard to show people what we deal with. But maybe this campaign can give people some idea.”

“Those are the type of things that are invisible when you’re not on the chair. But once you’re on

it, you’ll never not see them again. I’ve been on both sides. It’s only when you have sat on it and experienced it for yourself that you know. My friends have carried me up and down enough steps to know when a place isn’t disability friendly — we’re only asking for that level of understanding.”

Navigating Dublin city on a wheelchair has not been easy for Cole.

“I’d go out on a limb and say that 70pc of the buildings in Dublin city centre are not accessible... Temple bar is a nightmare — it’s like World War III for wheelchair users with all the cobblestones. I understand the need to protect heritage buildings, but why do I not factor into this collective heritage? They put electricity, heating and water in because it’s necessary for able-bodied people, but a lift would be too much. It’s your heritage then, it’s not my heritage. If I can’t even access so many parts of it, then how can I call this city mine?”

Six months ago, Cole learnt to drive and it dramatically changed his life. But he points out that other wheelchair users who choose to use

public transport or other basic amenities struggle to lead a normal life.

“Even in Grafton Street, you may make it to the first level of the shops, but none of them have a lift. If you can only access 25pc of a building, I doubt that it classifies as ‘accessible’. On the bus, there’s only space for one wheelchair, so if I have a friend who uses a wheelchair, we could not travel together. There are 120 spots on the bus, but only one person with a wheelchair can get into it. I have had experiences where I had to wait for a second bus because there was already a wheelchair user on the first.

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SII’s CEO Fiona Bolger points out that not enough people are aware of what a spinal cord injury is and how it can impact a person’s life.

“Your spinal cord runs from the base of your skull right down to your bottom,” she says. “Depending on where along that level you sustain

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“Without a medical card, the financial impact of having a spinal injury on an individual can be astronomical. It can really impact somebody’s quality of life.

“I don’t think that’s too much to ask — it’s actually the bare minimum. People with spinal cord injuries shouldn’t have to feel the financial burden based on the fact that they have a disability — that could happen to anyone.”

Cole fractured a part of his vertebrae after he fell off a wall nearly 10 years ago. He was rushed to St Vincent’s University Hospital and then to Temple Street children’s hospital where he had reconstructive back surgery. Over 10 hours, doctors placed rods in his back to help support him. After recovering over four weeks, he returned home in a wheelchair.

“To an extent, I’m glad I was so young when I had my injury, I believe it’s that much easier for children. At 15 years of age, being in a hospital environment for that long, missing school and all those normal teenage things can be physically and emotionally draining.

“We moved to a new home because my house couldn’t be renovated for my needs. After I went home, I went back

to school and I had some really good friends who helped me get back into normal life.

“It is a big adjustment going from being able-bodied to having a disability and being a wheelchair user, but it really depends on your willingness to adapt. If you break your arm, that’s a couple of weeks. But this is such a traumatic injury, your body can take years to adapt. My body took four years before it began to accept my injury. Then there’s the emotional side. The only thing that happens overnight is the injury. The recovering and getting back to your life takes so much longer.”

Cole finds that speaking to people who have had the same experiences can help the process of accepting the injury. He uses his role as a peer to help younger people feel a sense of community and to show them that their injury doesn’t have to define who they are.

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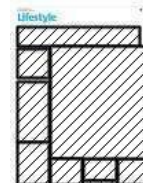
*‘Businesses feel like they’re doing us a favour by making things “accessible”. But we’re either all equal or none of us are’*



**Jack Shannon  
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Photo: Gerry Mooney





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Photo: Gerry Mooney

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## ‘How can I call this city mine if I can't access so many parts of it?’ — what it's like to get around Dublin as a wheelchair user

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Caption:

The 'A Day in My Wheels' campaign aims to raise €100,000 to provide essential support to 2,300 people in Ireland living with **Spinal Cord Injury (SCI)** Photo: Gerry Mooney