

# Spinal Injuries Ireland calls for automatic medical cards and 10-year reviews for people living with Spinal Cord Injury

**21<sup>st</sup> September 2023:** Spinal Injuries Ireland has published a pre-budget submission calling on the Government to automatically provide medical cards to anyone living with a Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) for a period of ten years without review.

The organisation estimates that some 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 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.

ENDS

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### **About Spinal Injuries Ireland**

Spinal Injuries Ireland is the only organisation dedicated to providing support services for the 2,200+ people in Ireland living with a Spinal Cord Injury (SCI). It provides a range of evidence-based services and resources to help people and their families adapt to life after the devastation of a SCI. The assistance it provides is specific to the needs of the person and their families. These services include one-to-one support from its Community Outreach Team, access to its trained peer volunteer programme, and a comprehensive educational programme. It also offers a professional counselling service to the most distressed service users and their families to help them cope with their new reality.