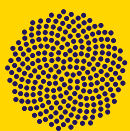


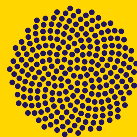
Ireland Where Digital Health Thrives



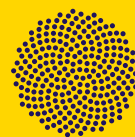
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Virtual care for heart failure

Professor Ken McDonald, Consultant Cardiologist and Medical Director of the Heart Failure Unit at St Vincent's University Hospital, talks about using digital health to combat the rise of heart failure in Ireland

"People are living far longer into old age, which is one of the reasons heart disease is at the very top in causes of death," says Ken McDonald who has been a cardiologist for nearly 40 years. "Increasing obesity and increasing diabetes diagnoses, also continue to drive heart disease rates up."

Heart disease is the most common cause of death in Ireland today. According to the Irish Heart Foundation approximately 10,000 people die each year from cardiovascular disease – including coronary heart disease, stroke and other circulatory diseases.

For this reason, Ken developed the Heart Failure Unit at St Vincent's University Hospital, Dublin, on his return after working as a consultant cardiologist in the USA in 2000. As medical director, he has overseen the growth of the unit into an internationally recognised clinical service and heart failure research centre.

"I thought it was an area which required much more attention," says Ken. "St Vincent's and St Michael's hospitals were very willing to support the creation of the unit. So, it became a great opportunity to start looking at ways to provide better heart failure care."

Virtual care

Ken says that digital health will play a major role in helping patients with heart failure, and in other areas of medicine as well.

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One highly successful example of virtual care developed by the Heart Failure Unit in 2015 is their Virtual Consultation. This involves a virtual heart failure clinic, where GPs can discuss their patients with a hospital-based cardiology consultant via video link-up. The virtual clinic now has over 150 GPs using the service.

"The GP can benefit from this real-time online consultation and decide on different medication, continued monitoring or perhaps an appointment at a clinic. And the patient gets the benefit of the consultation without needing to travel to a hospital to see the specialist.

"These patient cases would ordinarily be referred into our outpatient waiting list, so not only is it better for the patient and the doctor, but it reduces the pressure on the outpatient system making it more available for those that need face to face appointments.. And with more funds, the service could be extended to other specialities too, not just cardiology."

Preventing heart failure

In addition to the clinical services the Heart Failure Unit provides to over 4,000 patients, Ken also leads an active research programme.

One of their major successes has been the development of the Stop Heart Failure (STOPHF) initiative which Ken says is

regarded as "an international first". This programme offers screening to prevent heart failure. The programme uses a blood test to measure a protein called a natriuretic peptide, which is released by the heart when it is under stress. This is an early warning sign of heart failure.

Ken says, "Preventing a disease is always a better alternative than waiting for it to develop. Another theme of our research has been to develop new ways of delivering care. Our Virtual Consultation is one aspect of that.

"This has led us to link-up with digital health and medtech companies. They have the expertise in devices, and we have the expertise in knowing what the patient needs. We try to leverage IT to make sure that it's user-friendly for all generations while delivering what it needs." This requires communication between physicians and people with expertise in e-health to deliver the best package.

With all of these big developments and expertise, does Ken think Ireland can lead the way in digital health solutions?

"There are plenty of opportunities for growth, especially if we keep the focus on e-health. That is a critical aspect of the way forward in all healthcare delivery. In this respect, Ireland can do very well."



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