



Stronger together

Alison Moore spoke to Neal Donohue on his vision for his new role as the INMO's incoming student and new graduate officer

NEAL DONOHUE, who has recently taken up the reins as student and new graduate officer for the INMO, has nothing but respect and admiration for those who have chosen to enter the professions of nursing and midwifery knowing how challenging an environment that currently exists. Front and centre of his agenda is to put in place additional support structures for students and new graduates to ensure that they are able to take care of their mental health and manage the inevitable stress of the job.

"One of my goals is to look at the environment that students are stepping into. When you have shortages in staff, these students may not have the same levels of support that I had when I was training – and it is a very difficult training.

"Stress is the one thing that intertwines every aspect of the job at the moment. The stress of working in this environment, the stress of not having enough money to pay your bills, etc. So, while we are looking at the payment part we also need to look at helping people to cope," he told *WIN*.

Neal qualified as an RGN in 2006 and worked in the area of intellectual disabilities in Galway with the Brothers of Charity following graduation. Having started his career at the tail end of the Celtic Tiger, he has a very different experience compared to those who have graduated in recent years.

"I got into nursing because I love working with people. There were a lot of reasons but it boiled down to the fact that when I see someone in trouble I genuinely want to help them and to know how to help them. Nursing gave me a broad knowledge base on mental health, physical health, disabilities, everything. I felt very fulfilled for my first few years in training and working but then things changed.

"I have gone through the recession. I have gone through all those tough times. I have seen staff levels depleted and the difficult things that happen as a result," he said.

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When the challenges brought about by austerity arose, Neal tried going it alone in his attempts to improve matters for himself, his colleagues and his patients, but he found that he had a limited impact. By 2016 he decided that circumstances were so bad that it was time to step up and to start making changes to see if there was anything he could do to make a more positive environment.

"The way I did that was by contacting the INMO. I wasn't really an active member until then and when I stepped up as a rep I met a group of people who were able to give me the support that I needed.

"I was coming from a position where we were all tired and finding things difficult. I

found people within the INMO who were professional and informative and really inspirational," he said.

Neal attended his first ADC in 2017 and says that was where everything really hit home for him.

"I realised what this Organisation was about. Seeing so many people in a room who had this positivity and drive to improve things, and so much knowledge on how to go about doing it that I wanted to be part of it."

Protecting yourself

Now, through his new role with the INMO, Neal would like to make sure the next generation of nurses and midwives know how to protect themselves and are more informed on how to support themselves and their colleagues.

He has a certificate in counselling and psychotherapy which he feels has given him an insight into mental health and self care, and has also opened his eyes to how other students are supported during their training.

"During the training I found that while I was not dealing with half the issues and pressure that I dealt with as a student nurse, I was given far more personal support in coping with it.

"Student nurses are faced with every aspect of a person's life directly and while you have support from a staff nurse, they

themselves might be under pressure with their own workload and are too busy and stressed to offer the time and level of support that might be required by the student," he said.

Neal believes that psychological support would be best offered outside of the workplace or colleges.

"For students it can be difficult to walk down a corridor where there is a class going on and be seen by everyone who knows where they are going. Where the room is situated is so important as if it is removed from the place of work or learning, people can walk out the door and walk away," he explained.

Neal hopes that in the future self-care will be built into the curriculum to prepare student nurses and midwives to look after their mental health at work.

He points out that while there are already supports available for those of college age, specific support is needed for student nurses and midwives on clinical placements.

"There is a culture in nursing and midwifery to be resilient and to just get through it because it is the norm. Something that would be a crisis in another person's life is the everyday for the nurse and midwife. What I am hoping to do is find specific supports for nurses and midwives. I'm trying to get in touch with other groups who are looking for the same thing for workers in other areas of the health service and I am going to try to rally some students to also get involved," Neal said.

Rather than wait for a crisis to occur, he is hoping that by making self-care a part of the curriculum, instead of taking place on an exceptional basis, graduates will be better prepared in the workplace.

"We need to get in first and talk to students about what they may experience and things that they can do for themselves and to know where to go for help if needed. We are dealing with so much, you could go into the ED as a student and have a patient who has attempted to take their own life and then have to deal with a patient from a road traffic accident and then you go home at night, so how do you sleep and how do you make sure that you're okay? This is what I'm hoping can be taught. So that in first year you start learning good lifestyle habits and to learn to recognise in yourself if you may be having a problem," he said.

Neal is looking into setting up a pilot programme to deliver this and, pending its success, to then roll it out to all nursing and midwifery students nationally.

What can the INMO do for you?

From Neal's perspective, he doesn't just want to talk about what the INMO can offer students, rather he wants to see what the students want from him.

"It's not me telling them what they need to be doing. I need to connect with them and that's what I will be doing over the next year, travelling around and using social media to ensure that they know what is available to them and asking them what they need. I want to know about any issues they are having and if I can do anything I will step in and do it for them," he said.

To really affect change, takes a group of people working together and going in one direction and that is why I am now here with the INMO

There are courses run by the INMO's Professional Development Centre (PDC) that are beneficial for students and Neal would like to raise awareness of these.

"I was just in Beaumont Hospital where the INMO PDC was running the Tools for Safe Practice course for fourth-year student nurses. When you are going into a challenging work environment it is really good to look at health and safety and to know how you complete documents correctly. It is that level of professionalism that I have seen in the INMO that really supports nurses and midwives and students. That is where you get a really high standard that you can bring out on to the wards. It can help you to sleep better at night time to know that you have done things to that standard," explained Neal.

"When you are on your internship you take on a lot of responsibility and it is important to know where the boundaries lie. That's what this course is all about; how to do your job to the best of your ability while also ensuring you are documenting

everything correctly and protecting yourself. It is very practical and improves the standards of care across the board," he added.

According to Neal, all nursing and midwifery graduates need to know to learn how to stand alone as a professional; to be confident and competent, and he believes that the INMO has a great deal to offer in that capacity.

He believes that the PDC has much to offer new graduates such as help with CVs and preparing for interviews as well as courses such as 'Tools for Safe Practice'.

"I know that when I qualified this is what I wanted and it is really great that the INMO provides this as it would cost a lot of money to get these privately. At the moment those who pre-register with the INMO before they qualify will get a voucher for a course at the PDC to the value of €90," he said.

I asked Neal if he had a message for students, first-years in particular, about the role the INMO can play in their student careers and beyond.

"For students, the INMO is about connecting first and foremost. It is not about taking on the entire world and seeing what's needed. If first- and second-years are interested, I would like them to get involved in some very positive, fun charity events. It is a good way of connecting with people and can tie in nicely with looking after their mental health.

"Reps will have practical information if they need it but there should be more available than just information; I want to show them what is available to them and support them in whatever they want for themselves. Especially for the new students – they are coming in when they know how tough things are and that is impressive.

"I know what it takes and I know what it is like for them. I will do absolutely anything to ensure that their experience as student nurses and midwives is better. Whatever I can do to help them go in the right direction, that's what I am here for.

"People think of unions as being all about industrial relations but we are here to support people in their professional capacity and we will help in any way we can to get them through their training. Everything else in time," he said.

Get in touch

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