

# A seat at the table

With so many nurses and midwives working at the INMO, members can be sure of informed and nuanced representation, says the incoming student and new graduate officer. Interview by Freda Hughes

ROISIN O'Connell started the new year as the INMO's newly appointed student and new graduate officer. She has already hit the ground running and is anxious to connect with the students and new graduates she represents.

Ms O'Connell qualified as a nurse in 2019, working for six months on a surgical ward in Waterford before Covid-19 hit. She wanted to be closer to home and applied for a job in the emergency department in University Hospital Limerick (UHL), where faced with the realities of overcrowding she threw herself wholeheartedly into the job.

By her own admission, Ms O'Connell became involved with INMO by accident. Initially she wasn't aware of how the union could benefit students but with the 2019 strike looming, she and her colleagues were unsure of whether they should join the picket or attend their placements. They feared they could be penalised if they did not attend placements but they also wanted to support their colleagues and fight for better pay and conditions.

"I was the class rep and I decided to find out what we should do on behalf of my peers. My experience of engaging with the INMO was really positive and I decided I wanted to become part of this great support network. Soon I became the student rep on the Waterford Branch's strike committee and joined the INMO's Youth Forums," she told WIN.

Ms O'Connell's role on the strike committee involved drafting the rosters for interns in Waterford, Wexford, Kilkenny and Clonmel. Students were obliged to turn up for placement but it was understood that they would attend the picket rather than work. It was important for them to keep track of their attendance and she put systems in place to help with this. On the picket Ms O'Connell met INMO activists and was inspired by what could be achieved by working together.

She was also approached by RTÉ and gave her first interview when she was still a student nurse. Her colleagues were impressed by her capable, confident approach to activism. In turn she was



*The INMO's newly appointed student and new graduate officer Roisin O'Connell (pictured left) had initially tried to avoid nursing. Growing up watching the long hours and hard work that her mother put in as an ICU nurse in UHL she thought it wasn't the career for her. In her teens however she knew she wanted a career that would allow her to travel and to work anywhere in the world and she embarked on a PLC course that allowed her to work on placement in UHL and get a feel for nursing. The following year she was offered a place on the nursing degree programme in Waterford Institute of Technology and the rest is history*

*(Photo by Louise Brooks Photography)*

impressed by the solidarity within the union and this inspired her to increase her engagement. She was asked to speak at the launch of the Nursing Now initiative at the last annual delegate conference (ADC) held in person in 2019. She said meeting the other student reps from around Ireland at that time was inspiring.

"I felt I was among my peers. We were all so enthusiastic about our professions and wanted to make changes for the benefit of our colleagues. Next thing I knew, I was asked to speak at the ADC... and honestly a month before that I wouldn't have even known what ADC was. The whole experience was really empowering. So many of us on the wards are burned out so meeting passionate activists really lifted me and gave me the strength I needed," Ms O'Connell explained.

Money is always a big issue for students. College is not cheap and accommodation is out of reach for many. Although she was qualified by the time the pandemic hit Ms O'Connell was incensed when it was revealed that students and interns who worked throughout were not getting paid.

"The narrative around the strike was that we needed to keep our student and newly qualified nurses and midwives but just over a year later they have to fight hard all over again just to get paid for the work they did in the unprecedented danger of a global pandemic."

Ms O'Connell hopes to provide the same support to members that she received from the student officers who helped her become active with the INMO.

"I want to advocate for last year's interns who have not yet received recognition for their efforts during the pandemic. The number one reason nurses and midwives should join the INMO is because of the protection it offers. In our professions we are often dealing with life and death situations. Place this in the context of constant overcrowding and understaffing and you can see that we work in dangerous environments. When you add a global pandemic into the mix it is clear that we need the support of a union that will constantly be there to back us up and provide the information we need to ensure we are working in safe and fair workplaces.

"I also want people to know that if they come to me for advice and don't want to pursue their issue further that's okay too. There is no pressure to pursue every grievance and there are so many positives to be gained from joining a union. The peer support and networks are unrivalled.

"With so many nurses and midwives working within the INMO we can be sure of informed and nuanced input on our behalf in negotiations. We deserve a seat at the policy table and policy will be better informed and fit for purpose when we are given that seat," Ms O'Connell added.