

Polio comes back to haunt victims

THIRTY years after the last case of polio in Ireland, the illness has come back to haunt sufferers with what is being called Post Polio Syndrome.

A special clinic has been established in Dublin's Beaumont Hospital to deal with the problem, and over 60 people have been treated so far.

Those worst affected have had to resort to using wheelchairs.

The Post-Polio support group estimates that there are approximately 9,000 former polio patients in this country and up to half this number

will suffer from the newly discovered Post Polio Syndrome.

It is also being called Late Effects of Polio (LEP) and many sufferers would up to now have been ignorant of its existence, while personally experiencing a deterioration of their condition. The secretary of the Post Polio Support Group, Joan Bradley, said even she was unaware of the new syndrome until she read about it in an international polio journal.

At the same time, former polio patients had been silently suffering

unaware of the development. "We were looking around for answers to what was wrong with us and I only found out in that journal," she said.

PPS was a great worry to a lot of people: "Many have had a terrible struggle getting over it and don't want to admit they are going backwards".

The Post Polio Support Group is seeking special funding from the Department of Health to help sufferers avail of special aids but, so far, this has not been forthcoming.

Ms Bradley last night pledged to continue to

lobby for those experiencing the syndrome, which needed to gain wider recognition, even within the medical profession.

Many of today's doctors would be too young to have any experience of dealing with polio, which was wiped out with the introduction of the vaccination following an outbreak of the virus in the 1950s. While over 60 people have so far been treated for PPS at Beaumont Hospital, the syndrome continues to be a subject of controversy internationally.

SEE: Page 11

Polio has returned to haunt sufferers

EXAMINER 715196. Page 11

by Andrew Bushe

THIRTY years after the last new case of polio in Ireland, the illness has come back to haunt sufferers with what is being called Post Polio Syndrome.

At least 60 people have been examined at a special clinic established in Beaumont Hospital. The worst affected are forced to use a wheelchair and moves are underway to set up a special trust for sufferers.

Dr Orla Hardiman, a neurologist, who first came across the condition when she was training in Boston, said that people hit by what is also being called "late effects of polio" (LEP), suffered a wide range of symptoms.

Joan Bradley, secretary of the Post-Polio Support Group, said they estimated about 9,000 former polio patients were still alive in Ireland and about 4,200 of them either are already or will suffer from the problem.

Following questions from Fianna Fáil Deputy Leader Mary O'Rourke and Labour TD Roisín Shortall, the Minister for Health, Mr Noonan, said he did not consider it necessary to make any special financial arrangements for Post-Polio sufferers as they could apply for existing schemes. "He is talking nonsense," Ms

Bradley said, "None of the schemes is available to people who are working and, even for those who are unemployed, there are only limited amounts."

Many of the aids are very expensive. Callipers can cost £1,000 to £1,500, an ordinary wheelchair is between £500 and £1,700 and a powered wheelchair is £2,000 to £4,000. "I know of one woman who has had to sell her car to buy a wheelchair," she said.

She stressed that it was important the problem gets wider recognition. "We were looking around for answers to what was wrong with us and I only found out from an international polio journal. Education is very important.

"There are people in little villages all over the country who will be concerned and wondering what is wrong and can't get help. Many have had a terrible struggle getting over it and don't want to admit they are going backwards.

"Most of the doctors who dealt with polio are now retired or dead and the new doctors have never seen a case and with the vaccination here hopefully never will."

Dr Hardiman said aspects of the post-polio syndrome are still controversial and not full understood. "The inci-

dence of the syndrome is also extremely controversial. Between one and 50 per cent, depending on which research you read, will get the symptoms.

"People get a range of symptoms. Those most severely hit will develop new muscle wastage and joint and muscle pain and aching. That results in new functional disability.

"People who had worked very hard to get rid of crutches and callipers when they were younger find themselves having to go back to use some of these aids again because of their complaint. Some even have to use a wheelchair.

"Fatigue is also a big problem and just what is causing it is still controversial — does it result from problems with the muscles or with damage to the nervous system," she said.

American research has indicated that the worst affected with new muscle weakness would only be about one to two per cent but in her experience in Ireland it was higher, perhaps six or seven per cent.

She said one of the difficulties was that many sufferers have been labelled neurotic or depressive but a recent study had dismissed this.

She said that a trust should be set up to help sufferers.