

#SundayWiMIN23 Week 52: Dr Laura Heavey

Dr Laura Heavey is a Consultant in Public Health Medicine and Board Member of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF).

“I am a consultant in public health medicine, working in the National Screening Service since 2021. I mostly work with CervicalCheck and Diabetic Retina Screen - some recent projects have been examining how we can continue to improve equity in screening and how Ireland can achieve cervical cancer elimination. Health equity is a particularly important consideration in population screening - if population health services are poorly designed and delivered so that only well-off and already healthy people can access them, they can actually end up increasing health inequalities instead of reducing them.

I graduated from the University of Galway in 2011. After completing my internship, I spent 6 months travelling in South America. I then did 6 months of emergency medicine in Sligo Hospital before starting paediatric training. After finishing my basic training in paediatrics, I worked for MSF between 2015 and 2017. I then returned to Ireland to specialise in public health medicine. Along the way, I have gotten a master's in public health, a diploma in tropical medicine and a certificate in leadership. I had the opportunity to contribute to the ongoing reform of the public health medicine speciality in Ireland and to work with the HSE Global Health unit during my training. I am also an active member of the Irish Society of Specialists in Public Health Medicine (ISSPHM), supporting their advocacy on the public health implications of climate change.

I worked for MSF as a paediatric doctor, spending 9 months in South Sudan and 6 months in Borno state, Nigeria. South Sudan was still recovering from a civil war, which broke out after they achieved independence in 2011, and in Nigeria, the state government was in conflict with Boko Haram. Most of the disease we saw was related to the conflicts - food insecurity had led to severe widespread malnutrition, while disrupted and overwhelmed health services meant that many children had missed out on their routine vaccinations. This led to a perfect storm of measles outbreaks, TB infections, pneumonia, diarrhoea, meningitis and severe malaria. When I returned to Ireland in 2017 to specialise in public health medicine, I joined the board of the MSF Ireland branch office so I could stay involved.

I am currently on maternity leave so there is little that I can do at the moment except donate to MSF, try to help with their fundraising and join the protests for Palestine. In November, I was completely shocked, appalled and heartbroken by the deaths of two MSF doctors, Dr Mahmoud Abu Nujaila and Dr Ahmad Al Sahar and a third ministry of health doctor, Dr Ziad Al-Tatari, who were killed at Al Awda hospital in northern Gaza, while at work in the MSF Limb Reconstruction Unit there. There is never any justification for attacks on healthcare settings. Neutrality and impartiality are MSF principles - we treat the sick and injured regardless of who they are or their background. MSF has been calling for a stop on the attacks on healthcare, on indiscriminate bombing, on the forcible displacement of people, and on the siege which is depriving over a million Palestinians in Gaza of essential food, water, shelter and access to medical care. The situation is worsening now as temperatures fall and rain has flooded some of the camps.”

The Chairperson of MSF Ireland's board, Dr Eve Bruce (a plastic surgeon who has worked in Gaza in the past) has written in the Irish Times recently about the current appalling situation: <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/2023/12/04/israels-death-sentence-to-people-of-gaza-is-indefensible-and-must-be-stopped/>

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