

Over-50s GP visits soar 50% if they are for free

MIDDLE-AGED Irish people go to their GP almost 50% more often when it is free, a new study reveals.

They also reduce their GP visits by just under a third if they lose a medical card.

The research shows six out of ten people in Ireland pay GP fees, with approximately 40% of us entitled to means-tested free GP care - which is set to be rolled out to all under reform plans for the coming years.

The results indicate that gaining a full medical or GP visit card - mainly through a fall in income through unemployment - is associated with approximately 1.3 more GP visits per year, or a rise of 43% in

By **Lynne Kelleher**

the annual number of GP visits. Meanwhile, losing a full medical or GP visit card is associated with approximately 1.2 fewer GP visits or a drop of nearly a third in yearly GP visits. However, the study found that free GP care was not linked to a rise in the use of hospital services.

The report, by Professor Yuanyuan Ma and Dr Anne Nolan, is published in November's Health Economics Journal. It used data from the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing on over-50s in Ireland from a survey collected between October 2009 and February 2011 and a second survey from April

2012 and January 2013.

The study specifically examined the difference in reported doctors' visits from those between 50 and 69 years old who had either lost or gained a medical card between the two surveys. At present, children under six, and adults over 70 are entitled automatically to a GP card, regardless of income.

The study noted: 'While the proportion of overall out-of-pocket contributions to total healthcare financing is comparable with other EU countries, the use of direct out-of-pocket payments to finance [GP] care by the majority of the population is unusual in a European context.'

Dr Mark Dooley



MORAL MATTERS

To truly love, we must see life through a child's eyes

LAST week, as we travelled to school, our middle son made a distressing declaration. One of his schoolmates told the class that Santa was a hoax.

Even worse, the boy described in vivid detail the 'true story' of what happens on Christmas Eve.

I nearly crashed the car because, as I glanced in the rear-view mirror, I could see the colour slowly drain from our youngest. 'Of course, I didn't believe him and I told him to stay quiet!' he said.

'Yes,' I said frantically, 'you are a very good boy! Imagine not believing in something so wonderful and beautiful.'

'That's right, Dad, and you have even brought us to see St Nicholas's grave!'

Another quick glance in the mirror and then relief. Both faces looked satisfied. I spent the rest of the journey nervously waxing lyrical about how, if only we are open to it, our world is so full of magic.

What price can we put on innocence? What price can we put on this, the true essence of childhood? It is invaluable because, once taken away, it is gone for good.

Innocence is not naivety. It is not gullibility but a state in which we are fully open to surprise, to wonder, awe and love. It is how we were before the proverbial 'fall'. The opposite of innocence is suspicion, distrust and doubt. It is characterised by a loss of hope, trust and faith. The world becomes threatening rather than a source of miracles.

We love children because they are so full of innocence. And in their innocence, they shine with joyful wisdom. There is no darkness in them because there is so little distrust or doubt.

That is why it is shocking when we encounter a child caught in the clouds of doubt. To see their primal innocence prematurely snatched away is tragic. It is a crime against the moral law.

Children are entitled to their innocence. It is the one right that is inviolable because, without innocence, they are denied the joy of childhood. There will be enough time to face harsh realities, but not just yet.

But why limit it to the little ones?

Aren't we all entitled to our innocence, even in a world that scoffs at the mere mention of the concept? Mystic monk John Main spoke of our 'original innocence', something he believed is our birth right. When we dream of a new day, when we eulogise nature in poetry or sing sonnets to a loved one, we are recapturing our original innocence. When we gaze beyond the heavens in faith, or witness the healing miracles of love, we see the world through the pure eyes of a child. It is a condition of simplicity in which we experience life as a stunning revelation.

To look beyond things into their depths, to reach beyond the stars to the other side - that is what it means to sip from the well of innocence. It is to be uncorrupted by cynicism, to see life as something more than an excuse for sarcasm. It is to be open to the unexpected - to those marvels which hide from the sceptic but which smile at those with high hopes.

BY sheer coincidence, on the very day that my son nearly made me crash the car, I received a beautiful gift from one of our readers. Eilís Treacy is a mother-of-four who works as a children's nurse in Mayo University Hospital. She has just published her first book and it was this that she kindly sent me.

'Santa Writes Back' is a marvellous collection of letters from Santa to some very lucky little children. It is beautifully illustrated and a joy to read. But what makes it really special is the premium Eilís places upon innocence.

To little Ruth, who is having doubts, Santa writes: 'There will always be a Santa as long as there are children in this world and what a sad place it would be without them!... Love can make the magic happen. You can make it happen too with your love and hugs.'

And isn't that a message we all need to hear no matter what our age? Old or young, the source of all magic is love. But to love we need the open heart of an innocent child who somehow manages to see the good in everything.

We need to drop our defences and trust that the borders of this beautiful life do not stop at the threshold of our doubts.

—mark.dooley@daily@mail.ie—

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