

Government seeks to join 'cheap drugs' bloc

IRELAND is seeking to join a league of nations to access cheaper medicines by negotiating as a bloc.

Health Minister Simon Harris confirmed Ireland is to open negotiations with Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Austria on joining their group on drug pricing and supply.

He is writing to the four to formally signal our interest in becoming the fifth member of the collaboration, known as the BeNeLuxA Initiative.

Leo Varadkar used his recent speech to the European Parliament on the future of Europe to call for cheaper medicines through a pooled system. The Taoiseach said: 'I believe that

By **Senan Molony**
Political Editor

we should work more closely on the cost of medicines.

'This could save billions for taxpayers, freeing up funding to ensure that modern medicines are available to patients at the same time in every country. Let's pool the buying power of 450million people to do so.'

Minister Harris yesterday said he was delighted to receive Cabinet approval for Ireland to open talks on joining the pharma league.

'I look forward to working with these countries to explore opportunities to secure affordable access to new medicines

for Irish patients,' he said.

'I will be travelling to Belgium and the Netherlands in the coming weeks and hope to begin discussions with my ministerial counterparts in both countries.' Securing access to new and innovative medicines, in a manner that is affordable and sustainable, was a key objective, he insisted.

The BeNeLuxA collaboration is well established and it would be 'a concrete step forward,' for Ireland to join, he said.

Savings would run into the tens of millions - and officials said they expected Ireland's application to join the league to proceed smoothly.

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Dr Mark Dooley



MORAL MATTERS

A day when both love and death must be on our minds

IT IS Ash Wednesday, St Valentine's Day and, as it happens, my eldest son's 13th birthday. How do you have a party on a day of fast and abstinence? Luckily, our son has planned his festivities for another day.

Still, I wonder how many will prioritise romance over penance today? How many of the millennials even know it is Ash Wednesday? How many are there who still care? You might be surprised. Lent continues to have a curious attraction for many people.

Today, the churches will be unusually packed with penitents, many of whom will attend daily Mass for the full 40 days.

The priest dips his finger in ash and makes the sign of the Cross on the penitent's forehead.

The ash comes from the palms used during last year's Palm Sunday celebrations. Burned and broken down, they are now used to remind us of our mortality.

But who wants to be reminded of death and decay? Who wants to be reminded that from dust we came and to dust we shall return? Why bother with such gloom in an age of glitz and glam?

Actually, I think there is a way of looking at it that dispels the darkness. It is not that you are having death, quite literally, shoved in your face. Rather, it is a gentle reminder that time is a gift.

The one thing this generation cannot claim as an entitlement is time. Yes, they talk of wanting 'my time', but is it really their time? The truth is that we are all on borrowed time.

The ash is a symbol that time should never be taken for granted. It has been given to us without any conditions, but that does not mean it is unlimited. Here today, gone tomorrow.

It is true: one day, we shall return to dust. Is that cause for despair? Only if you waste the precious gift of time.

St Benedict tells us to 'keep death always before your eyes'.

This is not to make us morbidly obsessive but to keep us on our toes. It is to remind us that waking up each morning is a miracle.

The emphasis is not on death and dust. It is on life and living it to the

full. It is a way of waking us up to the wonders of the world.

It is amazing how life can be transformed when you receive each second as a gift.

You begin to look at all people and all reality with love. You do so because you have finally woken up to the fact that none of it lasts forever.

Keeping death before your eyes is the seed from which true love begins. If there is a connection between Ash Wednesday and Valentine's Day, it is that we cannot truly love without being mindful of mortality.

For love, that most beautiful of all emotions, will only truly bloom when you know that it, too, is subject to time.

He dips his finger in ash, not to make you despair, but to make you more alive. And the best way of never losing sight of death is to stay awake. It is to treat each day as though it were your last.

Of course, doing so is not a vain exercise because any day could be our last. But to wake up each morning in the expectation that this is your final day is to fundamentally change how you live. By keeping death before your eyes, you will see miracles where once there was only the mundane.

YOU will see those around you not as a burden, but as the source of all light and meaning. You will see the world as a gift of love and the heavens as a celestial mystery. You will see your work, not as drudgery, but as your gift to life.

You will begin to savour everything, for you will look at all things in a way you have never done before. Your heart will open to those who need help. You will see their gentleness and fragility, their deep longing for a little love.

He dips his finger in ash and invites you to wake up. Wake up to what?

To the fact that you have the gift of this day to see what you have never seen before, to offer friendship and forgiveness, to love and to be loved.

Today, we think of death. Tonight, we think of love.

But what day is truly complete without a sense of both?

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