

A STATE OF EMERGENCY

THE STORY
OF IRELAND'S
COVID CRISIS



RICHARD CHAMBERS

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The Story of Ireland's Covid Crisis

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 HarperCollins *Ireland*

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HarperCollins*Ireland*
1st Floor, Watermarque Building, Ringsend Road
Dublin 4, Ireland

a division of
HarperCollins*Publishers*
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF
UK

www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published by HarperCollins*Ireland* 2021

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A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.

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Source ISBN: 9780008502829

Ebook Edition © October 2021 ISBN: 9780008502836

Version: 2021-10-07

Dedication

Dedicated to the healthcare workers who saved countless lives and in memory of those no longer with us.

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PART I

Chapter 1: The Beginning

Dillinger's Restaurant, Ranelagh, 10 January 2020

Tony Holohan, his wife and two teenage children were in Dillinger's in Ranelagh for dinner. Surrounded by the buzz of laughter and groups of young diners meeting over cocktails and craft beers, Holohan was preoccupied. He couldn't fully concentrate on the meal, digging at it with his fork, his mind wandering to what was happening in China. He'd read a medical journal article on clusters of pneumonia of unknown origin in Wuhan and he did not like what he was hearing. 'If something is going to knock us over, this is it.'

By early January, Holohan, Ireland's Chief Medical Officer (CMO), had casually contacted a number of his closest colleagues, a sounding board of experts working across the health sector who would tell him straight if they were worried about this siren blaring in the East. He'd call Cillian De Gascun, Director of the National Virus Reference Laboratory (NVRL) at University College Dublin (UCD); Ronan Glynn, Deputy CMO; Kevin Kelleher, Assistant National Director for Public Health at the Health Service Executive (HSE); and John Cuddihy, the interim leader of the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC).

They'd have the odd chat in the evenings, talking about this new virus, what stood out to each of them, the links to a seafood market, the lack of transparency from China, the worrying signs of severe illness, the question mark around human-to-human transmission, and the fact that there was nobody in the world with any immunity to this thing.

The weekend of 25–26 January, Holohan was down in Limerick for his sister's fiftieth birthday. On the way back to Dublin, with his daughter driving the car, he called his insiders once more. It had just dawned on him that firmer action was now needed.

'Guys, I think we need to have a NPHET meeting. We need to formally organize.'

NPHET, the National Public Health Emergency Team, was not a new construct. There had been a number of NPHETs before. There had been NPHETs for moments of concern including the H1N1 swine flu, and just the previous year, 2019, for the CPE superbug scare. This time was shaping up to be very different.

The meeting was held in the Department of Health's upstairs boardroom on 27 January. Eleven people attended, led by Holohan. As the officials came together, there was a touch of excitement in the air. 'It's always nice to be in the room,' says Cillian De Gascun, who looked around the conference room high above central Dublin, as small talk filled the air. Officials chatted to each other before the meeting and on their way out. Some were familiar to each other, others were close colleagues who'd served years together in health services. 'Agh, it could go the way of SARS or MERS,' some officials reassured themselves; 'there was a feeling that even though we had convened, this could be a short-lived thing'.

The gathering was short, a check-in more than a crisis engagement. An opportunity to get faces in the room together. Boxes were ticked. The HSE's Emergency Management office said it would have a sufficient supply of personal protective equipment (PPE) for the 'coming weeks', with contracts in place to access more should it be required.

It was a meeting few people took notice of. There was no media reporting of the convening of NPHET or the HSE's National Crisis Management Team for a number of days. All attention was on a hotly contested general election campaign. Politicians had yet to see the storm clouds gather.

* * * *

'This one could get out of the bag.'

Professor Máire Connolly had been around long enough to know that something different was happening here. The Galway woman is one of the foremost experts in emerging infectious diseases and pandemic preparedness in Ireland, or anywhere for that matter. She had worked for many years in a lead role with the World Health Organization (WHO) and few people have stacked up as many airmiles in tracking global disease threats and natural disasters – she's been in Afghanistan, Kosovo, Iraq, Gaza, Uganda, Iran, Indonesia, to name just a few. In 2005, a *New York Times* profile interview focused on the emergency relief work that took her,