

## REAL LIFE

# The key to long life

The Irish population is getting older at an unprecedented rate, and now a new 10-year study is aiming to make Ireland the best place in the world to grow old

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IMAGINE living in a society where it's as likely as not that you'll survive past the age of 100. You probably won't retire until you're well into your 70s, and one-fifth of your friends and family will be over the age of 65.

Sounds far-fetched? Welcome to the Ireland of 2030. Official estimates show that in just 20 years time, 19pc of Irish people will be 65 years of age or older, with the greatest increase occurring in the 'oldest old' - those in their 80s.

Irish females born today will have a 50pc chance of reaching your 100th birthday.

Irish society - like countries around the world - is greying at an unprecedented rate, thanks mainly to improved living standards and huge advances in health-care. While this all sounds like good news, an ageing population will bring its own challenges. How can we afford to meet their greater health and pension needs?

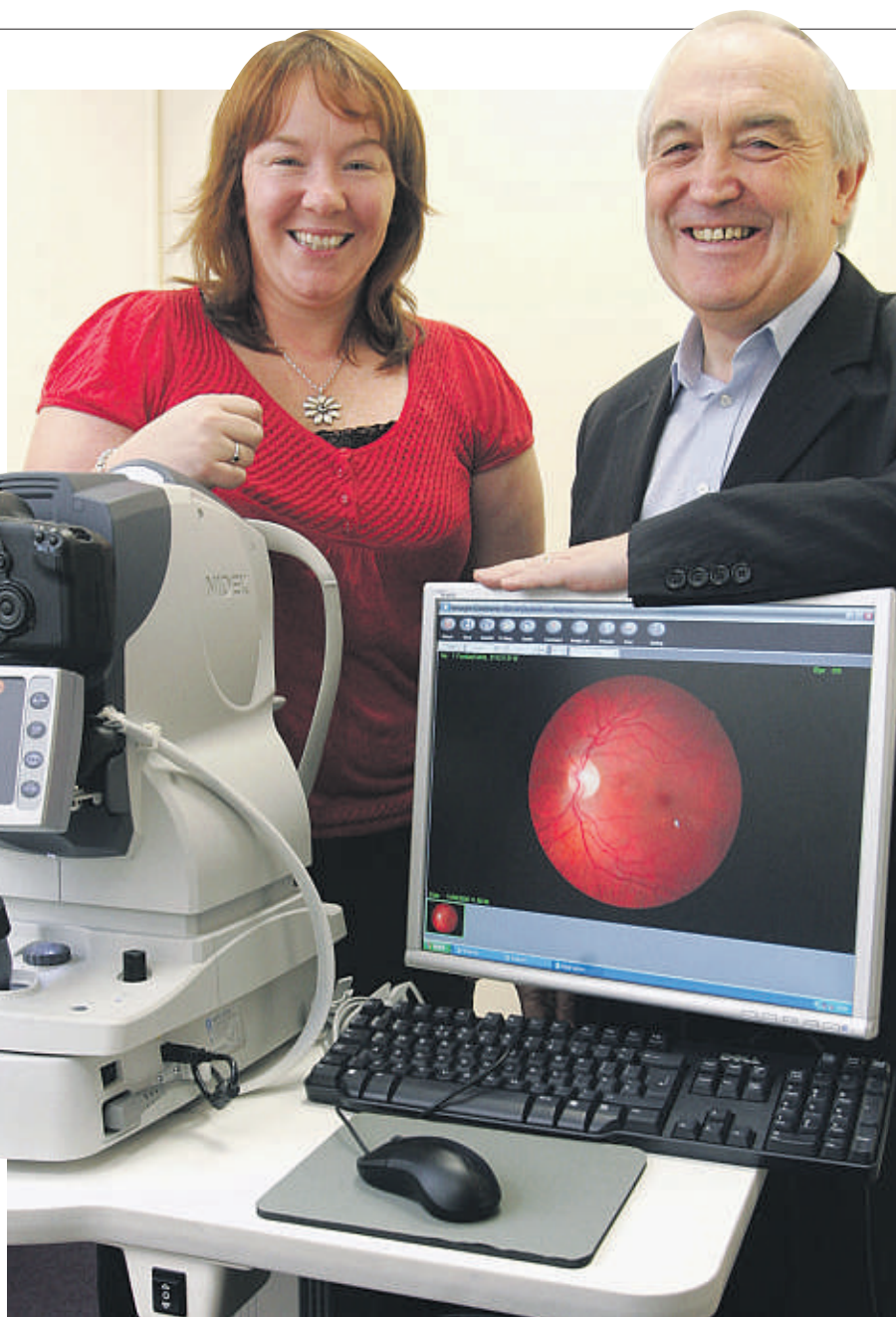
## Lowest

Currently Ireland has one of the lowest life expectancies in Europe and our OAPs are the poorest in the EU, due, in large part, to our relatively low state pension. How can we age better?

Researchers at Trinity College Dublin are hoping to answer that question with a major new 10-year study of economic, social and health data on the over-50s. The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing - or TILDA for short - will be the first time such a comprehensive survey on the process of ageing has been done in Ireland.

We're a decade or so behind the States and other EU countries, but it's important that we play catch-up - and quickly, says gerontologist Dr Rose Anne Kenny, TILDA's principal investigator, so we have accurate information about the ageing process to feed into future health, social and economic policies.

Having already conducted two pilot sur-



Research: Dr Hilary Cronin and Dr Brendan Whelan at Trinity College Dublin. PHOTO: RONAN LANG

veys, the €29m study - funded by Irish Life, Atlantic Philanthropies and the Department of Health and Children and conducted in conjunction with universities, hospitals and institutes of technology across the country - begins its national rollout next month, when a team of interviewers will begin knocking on doors looking for 8,000 volunteers, all over the age of 50, to take part.

understand how important this is to map our future, both economically and healthwise."

Participants will undergo a wide-ranging interview in their own homes, with questions covering topics from health to family to work and relationships.

After that, the participants will be invited to attend a clinical assessment, held either in a clinic in Trinity College Dublin or at a location in Cork.

"They'll be questioned and tested again at intervals over the course of the study."

## Vital

This medical assessment is vital as it provides subjective evidence for the survey, says Dr Kenny, rather than simply relying on the answers that the participants give about their own health, as most longitudinal studies in other countries have done.

"We have realised that it is important not just to have subjective health data. For example, we ask participants, do you have osteoporosis?"

"But then we actually measure bone density as well. We know from our pilot studies that there is a huge mismatch between people saying that they have osteoporosis and those who actually do.

"From these comparisons, we know that perhaps 30pc more have osteoporosis than those who think they do."

The relationship between what the researchers call subjective and objective evidence is one of the reasons ageing experts across the world are keeping a close eye on TILDA. Most other longitudinal studies relied solely on a questionnaire and researchers were forced to rely on the participants' own evidence about their health.

So the gap between participants' answers and the medical findings as measured by the TILDA team can be applied to international studies, allowing other countries to extrapolate the true extent of their own health problems.

Irish people in particular tend to think they're healthier than they actually are, acknowledges Dr Hilary Cronin, TILDA research fellow.

At a dedicated test centre at Trinity College, Dr Cronin and her team have assembled an array of cutting-edge medical equipment, designed to get an accurate picture of the participant's physical health and how that changes over the course of the study.

There's a machine that tests your blood

"In September, many households will be getting a letter from us, informing them that an interviewer will be calling," says Dr Kenny.

"The more people who respond positively and the more people who are prepared to give their time to the interview, the more accurate our data will be and the better we'll be able to inform policy in Ireland.

"We really need to get the Irish nation to

JUST AS IMPORTANTLY AS THE VITAL HEALTH AND ECONOMIC DATA, TILDA INTENDS TO GIVE THE OVER-50S A VOICE AS THEY AGE



Insight: Nick Corish talks to President Mary McAleese at the launch of the TILDA research study. Below left: Des O'Neill tries out the gait mat which tests how prone people are to falling over. Below right: TILDA's principal investigator Dr Rose Anne Kenny. PHOTOS: MAC INNES PHOTOGRAPHY



pressure – not just the simple test you'd find in a doctor's office, but a hi-tech, complex machine that reads your blood pressure every time your heart beats.

"There's a heel test that checks for osteoporosis. There are memory tests and an eye exam, including a photography machine that captures a snapshot of the back of the eye," helpful, explains Dr Cronin, in predicting macular degeneration.

There's a gait mat – a long rectangular mat that looks like something you'd put in the hall, but is in fact a way of testing how likely you are to fall.

"Participants are asked to walk along this mat while simultaneously performing a mental test – saying the alphabet backwards, say, or performing a numbers task."

All of these tests give a clear picture of the health problems our ageing population will develop, and will allow us to plan ahead for them, says Dr Cronin.

But it's not just health problems which an ageing population will bring. We'll also be faced with economic difficulties.

When the number of people relying on state and private pensions – and drawing these pensions for longer because of an increased lifespan – increases faster than the working population who are supporting them through the tax system, we're going to have a problem.

How can we encourage people to stay in the workforce? Prof Brendan Whelan, former head of the ESRI, who is on secondment from that institution to act as TILDA research director, explains that the survey will try to find out what induces workers to keep working.

"We want to find out would people be interested

or capable of staying at work longer. This would give them a longer time to accumulate a nest egg, and less time drawing on their pension," says Prof Whelan. "We are trying to establish, what are the factors that incline people to retire?"

"If the government can then intervene and change these factors, it can have an influence on the retirement age.

#### Voice

"It will also be the first time we've collected data on people's income and assets, to find out if people are provided for in old age in ways other than the pension system.

"They might have a shop, a farm or a second home. We have no data on that at the moment."

Just as importantly as the vital health and economic data the survey will provide us with, TILDA intends to give the over-50s a voice as they age.

They'll be given a chance to express how they feel about getting older and their views on the support services that are already in place.

It will take into account how much help – financial and otherwise – old people get from younger relatives or from the community, and indeed how much support goes in the other direction.

Ultimately, says Dr Kenny, as well as the

stated goal of making Ireland the best place in the world to grow old, the study could also help to put Ireland in pole position to capitalise on a growing grey marketplace.

"My vision is that Ireland will become an international test bed for research and development in ageing. We certainly have the intellectual and academic capacity to do that – we have leaders in neuroscience, dementia, movement in ageing, stroke disease in ageing.

"We have Intel investing in technology to maintain independence in ageing.

"We have a unique opportunity to make in Ireland a niche resource for R&D in ageing," Dr Kenny adds.



## IRELAND GROWING OLD GRACEFULLY

- By 2031, according to Department of Health estimates, one in five Irish people will be 65 years or older.
- The greatest increase will be in the over-80s.
- Of female children born today, more than 50pc are likely to survive to age 100 or beyond.