Ear irrigation is a frequently performed procedure and is largely delegated to nurses in primary care settings. Research indicates that nurses often have had no formal training in the safe management of ear care problems, and often the only training received is to observe another and then put into practice (Rodgers, 2000). The inappropriate use of equipment in assessing and treating ear care problems has significant risk management issues. It is important that nurses are made aware of current best practice in this area. It is estimated that about one third of all elderly people have problems caused by a build up of ear wax at some time. Excessive wax needs to be removed before it becomes impacted, which can give rise to tinnitus, hearing loss, vertigo, pain and discharge. Given that we have an increasing elderly population, new approaches to ear care services needs to be considered when planning for services.

Background
Access to ear care training was an identified need within the practice nursing arena from the time the Professional Development Co-ordinators for Practice Nursing (PDCs) first came into being in 2001. Whilst the Royal Victoria Eye and Ear (RVEE) Hospital, Dublin provided an ear care programme, it was unable to accommodate the large numbers of practice nurses requesting this education. Nor were many practice nurses in a position to travel on two separate occasions to Dublin to avail of this training. This required the PDCs to seek other options, and so sourcing the training through an English company was an acceptable alternative. To this end in 2005, Rosemary Rodgers from the Primary Ear Care Centre in England came over with her husband and business manager Don and travelled throughout Ireland delivering her one day Clinical Excellence in Ear Care Study day. These visits were enabled by the PDCs with funding from the National Council for the Professional Development of Nursing and Midwifery and the HSE. Rosemary and Don came again in 2006, 2007 and 2008. The programmes were well received and evaluated positively overall. M&K (UK) also delivered training in the north west of the country in 2008. However, these arrangements were no longer sustainable or indeed suitable for current practice requirements.

Linking with practice development colleagues from areas such as Older Persons Services, A&E, Intellectual Disabilities and Mental Health has also identified a need to develop nursing services in ear care for these areas. By expanding their scope of practice to include ear care, nurses working in these areas contribute to service improvements for clients, in that services can be delivered in the most appropriate setting and within an acceptable timeframe. Access to ongoing education and training in ear care in an Irish context was required and adapting a strategic approach to this development was a pragmatic decision made by the PDCs. Previous arrangements were no longer adequate, suitable or sustainable in the long term.
The Transformation Programme (HSE, 2007) has six priorities. Priority Two states that; “Primary, Community and Continuing Care services will be reconfigured so that they deliver optimal and cost effective services” (p11). This translates for the client as the ability to easily access a broad spectrum of care services locally. Each client is entitled to expect high quality care measured against transparent standards. Nurses working in the aforementioned clinical areas, who are interested in expanding their scope of practice by providing nurse-led ear care services, will have the necessary and appropriate professional support to progress this service development with access to an established national ear care training programme. Nurses trained in ear care reduce treatment costs, reduce the use of antibiotics, educate patients in ear care, increase patient satisfaction, and raise ear awareness. (Br J Gen Pract. 1997 Nov;47 (424):699-703)

We are delighted to report that nurses around the country will now have access to a nationally approved standardised Irish programme.

Developments in 2009
As the Royal Victoria Eye & Ear Hospital (RVEE), Dublin is the national centre of excellence for ear care in Ireland it was an obvious starting point for the National PDC group in researching available options. In January 2009, the chairperson of the National PDC group approached the School of Nursing in the RVEE to explore the possibilities for the development of a standardised national ear care education programme. Chris Huet as principal tutor in the RVEE School of Nursing was open to this exploration and assigned then tutor, Elspeth Finlay to work with the national group to develop an appropriate programme. During 2009 a number of PDCs worked closely with Elspeth and this collaboration lead to mutual agreements with the first ‘Train the Trainers’ ear care programme taking place in October 2009. The outcome of this is that we now have twelve nurses trained as Ear Care Trainers and the first programmes are due to be delivered commencing later this month with a number of additional programmes available throughout 2010.

We are delighted to report that nurses around the country will now have access to a nationally approved standardised Irish programme being delivered locally either through the Centres for Nursing and Midwifery Education or by the PDC thus making best use of available resources which are geographically accessible to all.

For further details on the availability of the programme in your area, please contact your local Professional Development Co-ordinator for Practice Nurses or your local CNME.

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On behalf of the national group of the Professional Development Co-ordinators for Practice Nurses