The Implementationof the National Integrated Low Back Pain Pathway (NiLBP)

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Introduction

Low back pain (LBP) is a leading global cause of disability, affecting millions of people and placing a significant burden on health systems and economies.

The National Clinical Programmes for Trauma and Orthopaedic Surgery and Rheumatology have developed a **National integrated Low Back Pain Pathway (NiLBP)** in collaboration with the HSE's Modernised Care Pathways Programme to improve access for patients who don't require surgical intervention.

The majority of patients with LBP should be managed in the primary care setting and do not require referral to secondary care. It is estimated that 70% of all MSK related referrals to OPD are for LBP.(1) Current access to primary care physiotherapy services is challenging due to the limited capacity available to meet current demand. Through the HSE's Modernised Care Programme, funding was secured in 2023 to test the newly developed evidence based NiLBP on two sites – **Mater Misericordiae University Hospital and University Hospital Waterford.**

Integrated Pathway

Patients who present to their GP's with non-specific LBP can access this **community-based physiotherapy led integrated care service within six weeks of referral**. Treatment includes both group and individual therapy sessions, guided by current clinical guidelines. The pathway is staffed with a combination of clinical specialist and senior physiotherapists. This ensures the most optimal care for those attending the service.

For those patients that are not progressing as anticipated, their clinical case can be discussed at the **Interface Clinic**. This service provides a direct and integrated link to a Consultant Orthopaedic Spine Surgeon, thus ensuring that only patients who need this expertise are scheduled for an OPD Consultant Clinic appointment.

The **Interface Clinic** is multidisciplinary and is scheduled on a monthly basis (virtual/in-person). At this meeting, clinical cases and imaging are jointly reviewed, allowing for a collaborative and comprehensive assessment. Together, the team formulates a personalised management plan for each patient. Onward referral for diagnostics, pain management or surgical treatment is planned from this Interface clinic. For those patients requiring surgical intervention, there is a **rapid access spine pathway** established at the National Orthopaedic Hospital, Cappagh.

Patient's Perspective

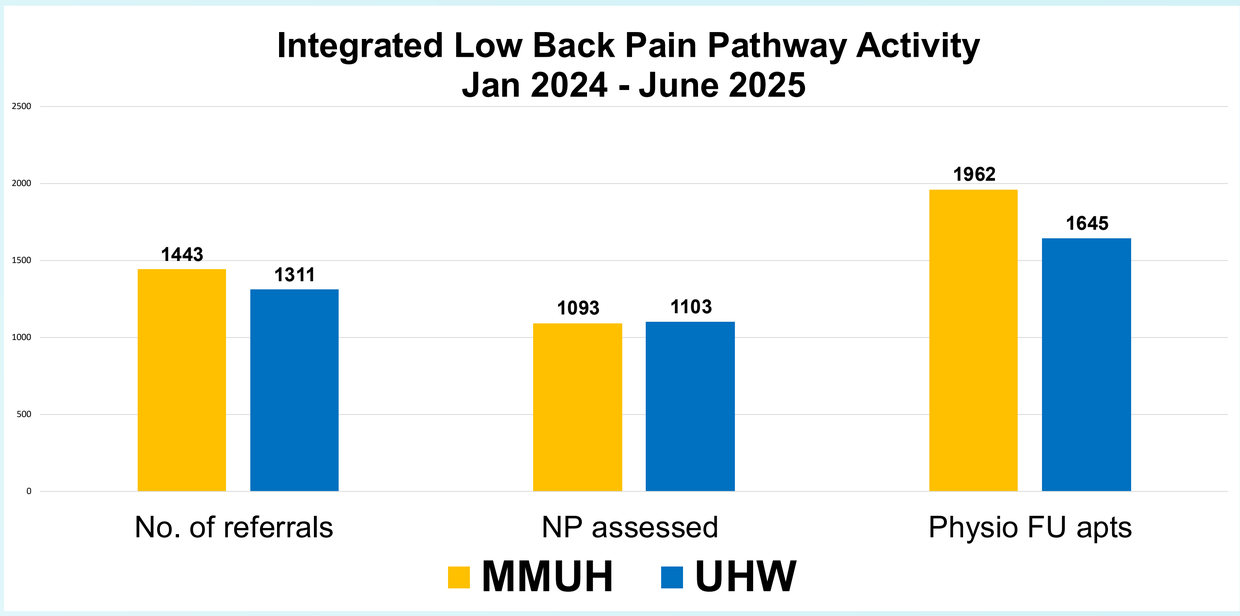
"I learnt exercises & techniques to manage my low back pain."

"The Back Classes gave me the confidence in my ability to exercise."

76 participants were randomly selected and invited to a focus group. **16** participants attended.
Patient feedback gathered was overwhelmingly positive.

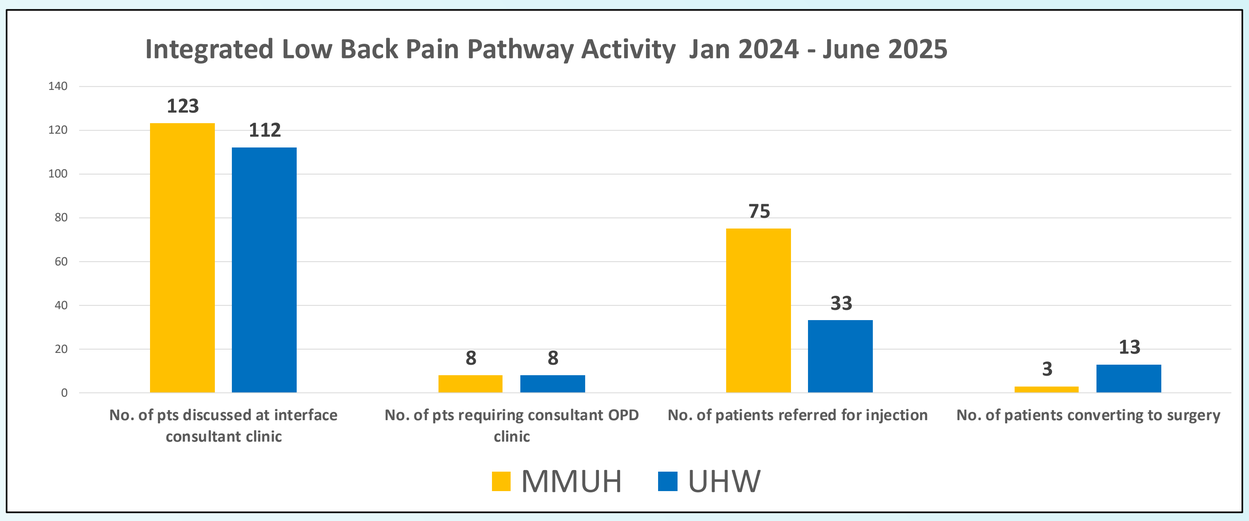
Impact of the Pathway

2,754 patients have been referred to the pathway since January 2024.



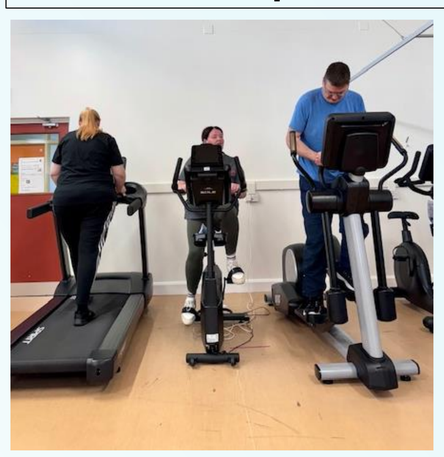
Interface Clinic Review

9% required discussed at Interface.*
7% of those discussed at Interface converted to surgery.*
Low conversion rate to Secondary Care
The presence of clinical specialist physiotherapists in the community acts as an effective gatekeeper, ensuring specialist resources are reserved for those who truly need them.



Back Classes

Back Classes are an integral part of the NiLBP pathway.
530 patients have been referred to a Back Class.



Looking to the Future

The results presented identify the need for this pathway to be implemented nationally. This pathway is cost effective and aligns with Sláintecare principles by shifting care left. The pathway demonstrates strong alignment with the RE-AIM framework—reaching a large patient population, easily adopted by other centres, and scalable with appropriate funding. It demonstrates that placing specialist expertise in primary care reduces the burden on secondary services, while also supporting local teams.

Acknowledgements

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References

1. Casserley-Feeney S, Kiely R, Keane N, Killeen G (2025). MSK Triage Initiative All Sites Visit Report 2024. Dublin: Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland.

Integrated Healthcare: Empowering People through Transforming Care