Lung Cancer:
Awareness, Stigma, Inequality
MSD/Marie Keating Foundation
The Foundation are known for their successful awareness campaign, "Listen to your Lungs." The event also served to launch the new lung cancer awareness campaign. The general public believed the rates of lung cancer to be 80% higher in Ireland versus more affluent areas. In fact, a worrying 10% of the general public were spot on – they correctly identified that the prospect of living for years and even to be cured. This is hugely rewarding for us.

Why is lung cancer so low-key? Although about 2,300 Irish people are diagnosed with lung cancer every year and more Irish men and women die from this disease than any other type of cancer, lung cancer remains out of the spotlight, Ger Brennan, MSD’s managing director, told the audience of health professionals, policymakers, and patient advocates. Yet despite stark statistics such as these, awareness of lung cancer remains poor relative to other cancers. For many conditions, there are particular challenges in relation to early diagnosis, investment, and access to innovative medicines, and such issues are particularly acute in lung cancer, asserted Brennan.

He explained that the research, which involved surveying over 1,000 people, provided tangible evidence to ignite and sustain the conversation around lung cancer diagnosis and treatment. Awareness, or lack thereof, was immediately evident from the findings; for example, just seven per cent of those questioned recognised lung cancer as the single biggest cancer killer of women in Ireland. Meanwhile almost six out of 10 Irish adults, or 57%, believed that breast cancer was the leading cause of cancer deaths in Ireland of women, while nearly a quarter (24%) identified cervical cancer. This demonstrates the high level of awareness around both conditions compared with lung cancer, noted Brennan.

Equal access to early diagnosis and treatment will be even more critical in the future, as the National Cancer Registry is predicting that lung cancer rates in women will increase by as much as 13.6% by 2040.

The research also honed in on health inequalities, and here the general public were spot on - they correctly identified that rates of lung cancer are 60% higher in socially deprived areas in Ireland versus more affluent areas. In fact, a worrying 10% of the population believed the rates of lung cancer to be 80% higher in these areas.

Smoking cessation is the first pillar in any strategy to cut lung cancer rates, and at the meeting the speakers discussed novel strategies for smoking cessation, such as incentive schemes and tobacco substitutes. Yet as Ireland continues to deal with the fallout of our previously high smoking rates, increasing awareness of lung cancer signs and symptoms is crucial. Widespread screening may also form part of our national strategy against the condition in the future. While effective new drug therapies have changed the face of lung cancer treatment, patients will not see the benefits if they cannot access them. Patients should not be denied the opportunity to avail of these potentially life-saving drugs, Professor Crown concluded.

"If we never discover one new thing about lung cancer - if we apply what we know now, we have in our grasp the potential to decrease the burden, the suffering, death, and ill health of lung cancer."