

Address by

Mr. Michael Kitt TD

**Minister of State for the Environment, Heritage and
Local Government**

On the occasion of

The Sixth National Radon Forum

At

**Royal College of Physicians of Ireland
No 6 Kildare St. Dublin 2**

On

6th November 2008

Mr. Chairman, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland (RPII) and the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, I am very pleased to welcome you all to the 6th Irish National Radon Forum.

The aim of the Forum is to provide the opportunity for those with an interest in radon to meet and discuss issues of mutual interest. These include Local Authorities, radon measurement companies and remediation companies, researchers, legislators, representatives of national agencies with responsibility for building standards, health and safety experts and the public. I must say that I am most encouraged by today's attendance. I am delighted to support this event and the commendable, ongoing work of the RPII in increasing public awareness of the danger posed by radon.

Radon is a naturally occurring radioactive gas found in variable amounts in rocks and soil. When it surfaces in the open air, it is quickly diluted. However, where it enters an enclosed space, such as an ordinary building, it can, under certain circumstances accumulate to reach unacceptably high concentration levels. Long term exposure to high radon levels presents a direct risk to human health.

Radon is a known carcinogen and contributes to the incidence of lung cancer. This risk is especially great for smokers. Everybody needs to be aware of the risks from radon and of the potential health

consequences if they are exposed to high radon concentrations. This is especially true in High Radon Areas where the risk of such exposure is greater.

Ireland's unique geology, while providing us with a beautiful and rich landscape, gives rise to radon levels that are above the European average. The average indoor radon concentration in Ireland, weighted for population is 91 Bq/m³ (becquerels per metre cubed) compared to a European average of 59 Bq/m³ (becquerels per metre cubed). In Ireland homes with very high radon concentrations, above the National Reference Level of 200 Bq/m³ (becquerels per metre cubed), are all too commonly encountered.

The National Survey of Radon in Irish Dwellings was conducted by the RPII between 1992 and 1999. This survey quantified comprehensively the scale of the radon problem in Irish dwellings and identified those parts of the country where high indoor radon levels are more likely to be found. From the results of this survey it was estimated that approximately 7% of our total housing stock has radon levels above the National Reference Level. Approximately one third of the country is designated as a High Radon Area, where more than 10% of households are predicted to have radon concentrations above the National Reference Level.

In light of these facts the Government, mainly through the RPII, has invested significant resources to highlighting the risks radon poses to the public. Today's Forum is one such initiative.

Our perception of risk is not always accurate. When planning a foreign trip some of us may feel anxiety at the thought of flying when in fact studies have shown that, statistically speaking, flying is one of the safest methods of travel. The most hazardous part of such a journey is probably the drive to the airport yet in the familiar surroundings of our own car we do not perceive ourselves to be at risk.

Similarly the common perception of risk from radiological sources does not necessarily reflect the truth. Ireland itself does not have nuclear energy although there is a perceived threat in the public psyche that we are potentially at risk from nuclear facilities in neighbouring countries. Emissions from such facilities are of course closely monitored by the ever vigilant RPII, who make their findings available to the public.

A landmark study completed by the RPII last year, "Radiation Doses Received by the Irish Population", found that natural radiation sources account for almost 86% of all radiation exposure received by the Irish population. Radon alone accounts for 56% of total exposure. By comparison artificial radiation sources, such as from nuclear energy facilities, accounts for a mere 0.4% of the total radiation dosage we receive.

In the familiar settings of our own home it is all too easy to allow ourselves to feel complacent, to associate our exposure to radiation to distant sources that are beyond our control mitigate. This is not the case. Radon is the principal source of radiation exposure in Ireland and it is present all around us. We are all exposed to radon on a daily basis. I encourage every householder to have their home tested for radon, this is especially important if your house is located in a High Radon Area.

In terms of reducing our exposure to radiation radon is the area where the greatest impact is possible. Proven, effective remediation techniques exist to reduce indoor radon concentrations at reasonable cost. Further information can be found on the RPII website, www.rpii.ie, or by contacting the RPII on Freephone 1800 300 600.

The Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government plays a key role, and will continue to play a key role, in implementing national policy on radon, not only as the parent Department of the RPII but through its role in drafting Building Regulations and in providing technical guidance on radon remediation solutions.

The Building Regulations introduced by the Department in 1998, and up-dated in 2004, require all new buildings, including new houses, to incorporate radon protection measures at the time of construction. These radon prevention measures were in advance of building code requirements in many EU Member States. Since this time our national

housing stock has increased by over 50%. It is most encouraging that so many new homes constructed over the past 10 years have these protective measures in place from the outset. This Government will continue to strive for improvements in the quality of our homes and workplaces.

In addition, through its support for Local Authorities, I am pleased to announce that my Department is, in consultation with the RPII, developing guidance policy on how the risks from radon in social housing can be best addressed. The development of such guidance will help ensure that the risk posed by radon in social houses is minimized through agreed, coordinated and cost effective measures.

The Scheme of Housing Aid for Older People is already available to assist older people, generally over 60 years, to have necessary repairs or improvements carried out to their homes. Where a suite of works is being grant aided under this scheme, Local Authorities may also, as part of the package of works, assist with the provision of radon remediation works, where applicable.

A comprehensive radon survey has already been completed in all public buildings, including schools, throughout Ireland. Remediation measures have been undertaken where appropriate.

Since May 2000, exposure to natural radiation sources in the workplace has been governed by the “Radiological Protection Act, 1991 (Ionising Radiation) Order, 2000. The Order sets a National Reference Level for radon gas in the workplace. In accordance with the Order, an employer or self-employed person is required to measure radon levels in their workplace on being directed to do so by the RPII. In order to assess the risk from radon, the Health and Safety Authority has stated that all indoor workplaces in High Radon Areas must have radon measurements carried out. I urge all employers who have not already done so to comply with this obligation.

High radon levels can be found in a wide variety of workplaces and homes throughout Ireland. A cohesive, joined-up, strategy involving relevant state agencies and other key stakeholders is necessary to most effectively reduce the risk posed by radon in this country. This is the underlying purpose behind today’s event.

In this context the Forum will hear from speakers from Cork County Council, the Health Services Executive and the RPII who will describe how they worked together earlier this year to assess, communicate and remediate radon problems that came to light over the summer in the social housing stock of Cork County Council.

I would particularly like to welcome Dr Ferid Shannoun (p. Shan-noon) co-ordinator of the World Health Organisation's (WHO) International Radon Project. The aim of this project is to promote programmes that reduce the health impact of exposure to residential radon in WHO's Member States. This important project, which was part funded by the Irish Government, also recommends multi agency approaches when addressing the problem of radon.

I am sure you all will find the Sixth National Radon Forum to be both informative and beneficial through promoting inter-agency cooperation. I would like to thank you all for giving of your time in being here today and wish you a very successful meeting.