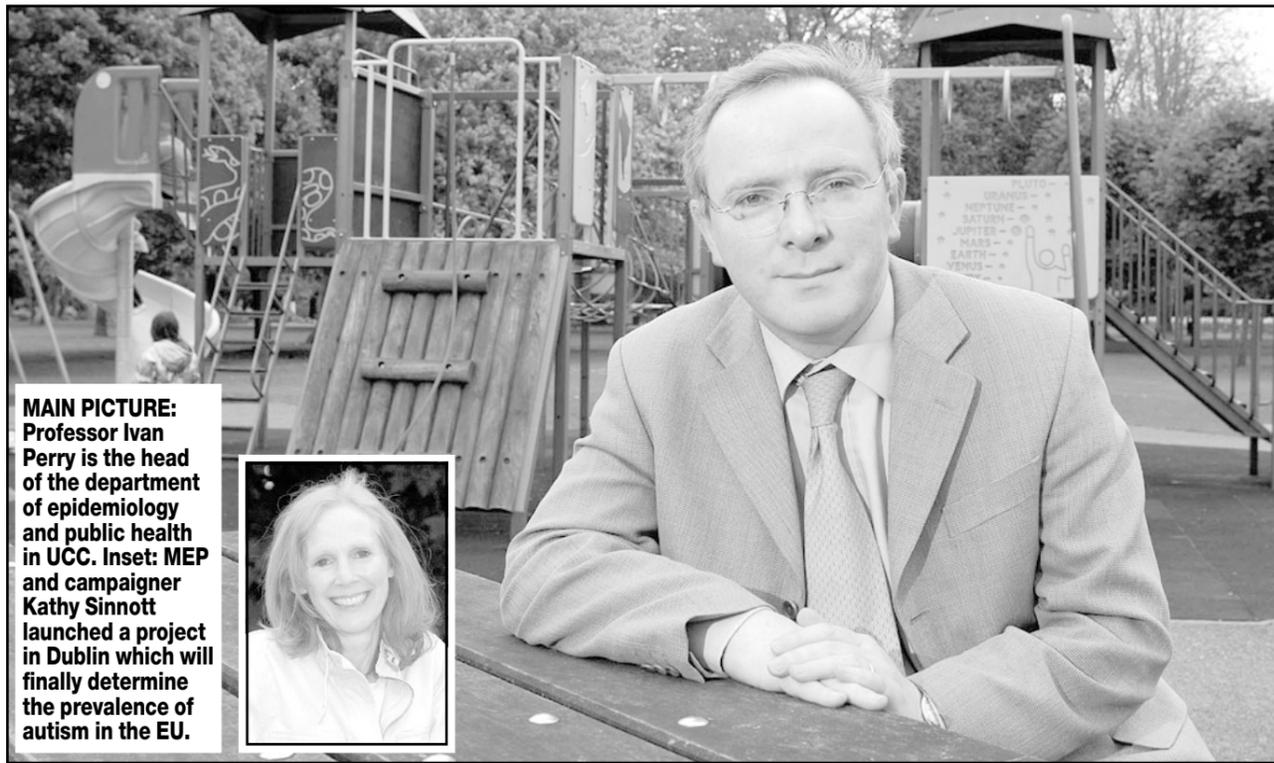


460 Cork/Kerry children suffering from illness



MAIN PICTURE: Professor Ivan Perry is the head of the department of epidemiology and public health in UCC. Inset: MEP and campaigner Kathy Sinnott launched a project in Dublin which will finally determine the prevalence of autism in the EU.

O'Shea on Monday

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ROBERT O'SHEA on who should be the Father of Ireland

WHO do you think deserves the title of father of this country?

Ask the person closest to you, unless they are a stranger, in which case avoid eye contact and walk slowly away.

The person you ask may say De Valera — 90% of them, at least — or some may choose another political figure mired in the fight for independence. But, no, tell them to scoot back another few years. Well before that.

Bobby Robson? No, probably they will say St Patrick, the man who brought organised religion to our shores.

It is fairly unlikely if you ask 12 people that even one of them will answer "Niall of the Nine Hostages." Despite the probability that one of them is plausibly his descendant.

News reached our ears last week that it is actually the man who kidnapped Patrick who has greater claim on the title of Father of Ireland.

What research carried out by a PhD student and her team at Trinity College has shown, is that one in every dozen Irish men carry the same Y chromosome, that which is passed from fathers to sons.

Genealogists then provided the research team with surnames that are linked to the "Ui Niall" (of Niall) dynasty: O'Neill, Gallagher, Boyle, Bradley, O'Donnell and Doherty. The frequency of the Y chromosome was so much higher in this group that, after considering the likelihood of genetic mutation after this long (Niall was high king in the 4th century AD), they found it to be in accordance with chromosomes that would date back to the last known living relative of Niall.

Niall supposedly had 12 sons, many of whom became powerful Irish kings themselves, so it is likely that they, ahem, got around a bit.

Such a theory is nothing new. Various scientists number Genghis Khan's descendants between one in 100 people alive today.

What we are looking at with Niall is around three million people and counting; counting quickly considering the recent announcement that Ireland has the highest birth rate in Europe.

What is frightening about this evidence is that it seems to conclude that powerful dynasties like Khan's and Niall's dominated the gene pool.

But who was Niall of the Nine Hostages?

Most of us know him as the bad guy who sold Paddy into slavery. Perhaps now that enough of us are related to him we should consider a rethink.

The best (funniest) account of his life concerns his demise and can be found at www.ancient-texts.org.

Apparently, Eochaid, the son of the king of Leinster, was refused hospitality by Niall's chief-poet, Laidcenn. As revenge, Eochaid kills the poet's only son. Instead of calling for the head of Eochaid, Laidcenn satirises and lampoons the man who kidnapped Patrick who has greater claim on the title of Father of Ireland.

Realising it is getting him nowhere, he gets Niall to invade Leinster and capture Eochaid. On the banks of the Slaney, Eochaid is apprehended by Niall's men and chained by the neck to a pillar in the ground.

He somehow escapes and Niall comes looking for him himself. To mark the occasion of the pursuit, the enigmatic poet Laidcenn says: "Let Eochaid be seen by us at this river for so long as a cow is being milked."

"Let it be done!" says Bocbaid in reply, popping up in the story and disappearing just as quickly without being explained, but not before losing his arms (it doesn't say why).

Laidcenn then starts reviling Leinster again and is struck dead by Eochaid.

Eochaid then flees to Europe. Niall arrives there a few years later in search of hostages and is shot down by a bow and arrow held by Eochaid, who has been hiding in some bushes.

Another account, however, says Niall was killed while entertaining the king of Scotland: "Niall was killed among the bards of the Picts as he was exhibiting his shape to them."

What exactly "exhibiting his shape" involved I can't say, but I can guess in some sort of olden way it means he was throwing shapes.

Did he deserve to die for this? I would say yes, but then, I am descended from one of the hostages.

Tackling the rise in autism

THERE has been an alarming 138% rise in the number of Cork children diagnosed with autism in the last four years.

And the increase in Kerry is even sharper — 261%.

In 2002, there were 193 Cork children suffering from autism — a lifelong condition that affects a person's ability to communicate, form relationships and learn.

This year there are 460 children suffering from autism.

The figures were released by Marion House, in Togher, where children from Cork and Kerry, suspected of suffering from autism, are assessed.

It operates under the Brothers of Charity and is funded by the Health Service Executive Southern Area.

In the Kerry region, the number of children suffering from autism

By **OLGA CRONIN**



jumped from 34 in 2002 to 123 this year — a huge 261% rise.

Psychologist and coordinator of autistic services for children in Marion House, Mary Kennedy, said the rise was 'very significant.'

"I don't have an answer as to the reasons behind the rise but it seems to be an international trend," she said.

"There is the theory that there is a greater detection rate nowadays but that is only part of the explanation — it's not the whole reason behind the increase."

This international trend was underlined in figures recently released in the US, which show that autism levels there have risen from four cases in every 10,000 children up to a startling 60 per 10,000 children —

which would classify it as an epidemic.

However, there are no such figures available to determine the prevalence of autism in the EU.

A Europe-wide study has never been carried out and no surveillance system put in place to track and analyse the reported rise. Until now.

Earlier this month, Cork MEP and disability rights campaigner Kathy Sinnott launched a project in Dublin which will finally determine the prevalence of the condition in the EU.

Ms Sinnott believes that without such a cohesive study and surveillance system, EU authorities will not take the issue seriously.

She hopes that after the two-year study, more

funding will be funnelled into research and early intervention initiatives to improve autistic sufferers' quality of life.

Top autism specialists from across Europe are involved in the two-year project, with UCC's Professor Ivan Perry leading the Irish leg.

Prof Perry is the head of the department of epidemiology and public health in UCC.

As founder of the project, Ms Sinnott welcomed the project.

"This is a giant step forward in the search to find out, once and for all, just how prevalent autism disorders are in Irish and neighbouring EU communities," said Ms Sinnott.

A number of years ago, Ms Sinnott won a High Court case demanding the right to free primary and secondary level education for her autistic son, Jamie.

Although successful

in the High Court, the Supreme Court ruled against her — the Government agreed to her demands, however, making an exception in that case.

Ms Sinnott added: "This is vitally important because early detection can increase the effectiveness of treatment improving the quality of life of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD)."

"Early diagnosis of autism makes all the difference in terms of helping a child to develop and learn new skills by placing the child in an intensive and structured educational program by age two or three.

"This project will provide us with the information we need to truly understand the scope of this problem.

"Until we understand what we are dealing with, we will never come up with the answers," she said.