

We are the Shovlin family from Donegal. When our son Eoin was born back in 2000 everything was great. He was a healthy happy baby. When Eoin was six months old, I started to get a sweet smell from his urine. He was very floppy and he did not seem to be hitting the milestones that his older brother had hit at his age. When it came to adding solids to his diet that was a battle, as he was happy with his bottle.

When we went for Eoin's 8 month check, we told the nurse about our concerns; that Eoin was not sitting up, rolling or crawling but the nurse told us everything was fine and that every baby was different. Eoin was never a day sick. We brought him to our GP and he was referred to Letterkenny Hospital. Dr. Maguire ran some tests and sent a urine sample to Temple Street. A few days later, we got a phone call from Dr. Maguire to say we had to be in Temple Street the next day at 2 pm.

What a bombshell. We packed our bags and headed for Dublin. We thought we would only be in a few days but in fact we were in for 25 days. When we arrived in St Brigid's Ward, it was a very cosy little unit. The staff were fantastic. They looked out for the parents, as well as the child. We were met by a lovely lady doctor called Dr. Naughten. She was the mother figure.

Eoin had been diagnosed with a rare life-threatening genetic disorder called MMA, the short for Methylmalonic Acidaemia. The tests started and it was tough going. Doctors were trying to get blood from our son which was very distressing. A skin biopsy had to be done and really all I wanted to do was to tell them to stop. Eoin had to be seen by Neurology, Physiotherapy, OT's, Child Psychologist and the Eye clinic. Eoin had developmental delay. We had to see the Dietitians so that we kept his diet right.

Because my husband had to go back to Donegal to work and look after our other son, I thought I was never going to remember what all the different doctors had to say. So after the doctor's rounds, either Catherine or Una, the sisters on the ward would come in and write down who the different doctors were and what they had said. (My saviours)

I was told all about his protein restricted diet (another bombshell) and that Eoin needed B12 injections and that I would have to give them to him. They gave me an orange and a syringe and told me to start practicing. Dr. Naughten could not believe that Eoin never had been sick and she said she would like to see how he would react to getting an infection. Well, she got her wish because he picked up a bug and it floored him, but he came out of it. I had met the metabolic team during Eoin's stay, along with all the above and they became our second family.

We got to meet the Play Specialists and they were asking about Eoin's older brother, Ciaran. I told them that Ciaran would not speak to me on the phone. He was only 4 years and could not understand where his mum and little brother were. Well the girls decided to take photos of St Brigid's Ward, including Eoin's bed, his room, the doctors and the nurses and even a picture of the outside of the hospital. These photos were made it into a book and it did the job.

I was brought down to see the Metabolic Unit and to be shown what would happen when we would come up to the OPD. Initially, there was a lot of information to take on board, especially in dealing with the restrictions in his diet. In the beginning we had to visit the OPD every six weeks. It was very hard when we brought Eoin home because as he got bigger people were offering him sweets, crisps, cakes and stuff, so we would have to say sorry but he can't have this food. They just could not understand that this wee boy was not allowed to eat this stuff.

Over the years we got to meet some great doctors; Dr. Monavari being one and when Dr. Naughten retired, Eoin was under the very careful eye of Prof. Treacy. Now Eoin is under the care of Dr. Joanne Hughes. All the staff in the Unit will do anything to help you and they are just at the other end of the phone. Also, we can't forget the secretaries at the front desk. They keep the Unit on its toes.

One last thing, I will never forget the day we were leaving St. Brigid's Ward for Donegal and Dr. Naughten came in and her words were, I wish I had taken a photo of Eoin the first day he arrived on this ward because we were taking a different little boy home, who was sitting up on his own. Also, she said you will have a very independent boy and that's for sure.

Eoin is very lucky because he only had 4 hospital admissions. He is almost 16 years old now and he is doing very well and that is the way we hope it will stay.

Thanks so much to everyone at the Unit

Regards Brian, Fidelma, Ciaran and Eoin Shovlin, October 2015