engineering staff can collaborate with medical experts to ensure that the devices of the future can be created in Limerick and manufactured in Limerick."

While R&D has long been part of the Limerick operation, the new centre will allow its engineers collaborate with medical professionals in a customised space using the very latest equipment and technology.

While the surroundings were new, the innovation centre was true to Cook's roots in working with doctors to bring new products to market Mr Doherty said. When Dr Charles Dotter performed the world's first percutaneous angioplasty - saving the leg of his elderly patient - in 1964, he had performed the pioneering surgery with Cook products.

"Our best ideas have come from listening to physicians who are always seeking less invasive ways to treat patients. This approach to product development was established from the beginning with Dr Dotter and it continues today. Our process always starts with listening to doctors' needs, " he said.

Dr Jan Werner Poley, head of endoscopy at the Erasmus Medical Centre in Rotterdam, said he had always received a sympathetic ear from Cook engineers in Limerick as they set about developing new products. That collaboration had resulted in products – such as a spray and mechanism to staunch gastrointestinal bleeding – which were already used on patients and others in development, such as a biopsy needle which was about to go into trials in the USA.

While he paid tribute to the innovators at Cook, Dr Poley also spoke positively about the Limerick workforce who put those ideas into practice on the factory floor.

"I was very impressed to see how the devices we use every day were all crafted by manual labour. It was amazing to see scores of diligent women - and hardly any men by the way - make all these devices by hand.

"Naively perhaps, I always thought that the blue plastic stents for biliary use we use every day would be made by one big machine with a big blue chunk of plastic on one end with stents shooting out on the other end. But it turned out to be a little bit more complicated than that," Dr Poley said. While it was the hope that the innovation centre would come up with the products of the future, Mr Doherty said the medical devices sector – which employs 25,000 people in Ireland – had serious concerns about the current revision of the EU directive on the industry and how it could serve to stymie innovation.

Currently before the Council of Ministers, the amended regulations, if enacted in their current form, could "slow down the pathway for devices to market", Mr Doherty said.

"In Europe we have traditionally been able to put products on the market for patients three years before the US or Japan, which means European patients get the latest technologies first.

"We understand that patient safety is a huge issue and I think a lot of these regulations are being driven in the wake of the PIP scandal, the breast implant scandal in France. But there is a worry that we could go overboard."

The less centralised regulatory regime in Europe was one which Minister Bruton acknowledged gave Irish companies "a competitive edge" over rivals elsewhere.

"We need to strike a balance which obviously has patient safety at its core but delivers a regulatory system that is proportionate and easy to manage for innovative companies like Cook," said the minister.

Cook Ireland executive vice-president Bill Doherty at the opening of the Limerick firm's new €10m innovation centre as Minister Richard Bruton and Dr Jan Werner Poley of the Erasmus Medical Centre in Rotterdam look on

Picture: Keith Wiseman

New book to tell the story of historic railway

MARTIN BYRNES

A NEW book, The North Kerry Line, telling the story of the Limerick to Tralee railway and its branches to Foynes and Fenit, will have a double launch , the first in Listowel this Sunday with Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Jimmy Deenihan and the second, with Eamon O'Cuiv TD in Newcastle West library next Tuesday.

It is a fascinating and multi-faceted story which dips into far more than the building of the railway line and offers up delightful cameos and interesting insights into Irish social history for the reader.

In 1871, for example, four years after the line to Newcastle West was opened, the Sisters of Mercy were granted a first class rail pass at third class fares from Limerick with permission for breaks of journey at either Adare or Rathkeale. But this concession was to last for only one month. Again, as early as 1870, the Earl of Dunraven, a board member of and significant shareholder in the Limerick and Foynes Railway, had volunteered Adare Manor and grounds as a tourist attraction to boost traffic on the line.

These initial excursions were successful and up to a thousand people travelled. However, "one party conducted themselves so badly, trespassing on his demesne, that further trips were cancelled. The earl complained to the [railway] company, but they said they were not accountable for the behaviour of their patrons!"

The North Kerry Line runs to more than 270 pages and is the product of half a lifetime of dedicated research by Dr Alan O'Rourke, a lecturer in public health at the University of Sheffield but whose interest in Irish railways was sparked by visits to relatives in Galway, Roscommon and Offaly.

The book opens with a very

Eamon O'Cuiv TD will launch the book in Newcastle West library.

valuable look at the state of the region at the termination of the famine and at the sudden and continuing depopulation of even the cities. It also gives a seamless narrative of the various attempts at the restoration of the economy and tells how Ireland, and especiallly the south-west, had a genuine world outlook at a time when it might otherwise have had reason to abandon all hope. It also explains how the Shannon Estuary was regarded as the engine of this recovery but.

Dr O'Rourke's book gives an exhaustive account of the fact that elements of the line were built by four separate railway companies and manages to unravel the often bewildering relationships between and within each.

But the opening of the North Kerry Line, did confer one immediate benefit: speed. Travel from Limerick to Tralee was generally by water to Tarbert and overland thereafter.

But when the railway opened, it took just three hours and 45 minutes to get from Limerick to Tralee and, because of the gradient of Barnagh bank, slightly less to come back. Newcastle West was an hour and 45 minutes from Limerick. Fares were by no means cheap. To Limerick from Newcastle West, first class, cost five shillings. That was fully a week's wages for a porter or clerk on the selfsame railway. Third class was half of that—still beyond the purse of the common man.

The railway did, in fact, regenerate the economy and major livestock fairs were held in all the principal towns along the route.

The book is published by the Great Southern Trail group, which has spearheaded the transformation of the Limerick section of the line into a walking and cycling greenway.

The launch of the book has also prompted a further project. Maria Leahy, a student of oral history at UL, is commencing a compilation of recordings of the lives and recollections of the railway families and of those who lived along the line.