

#SundayWiMIN23 Week 32: Dr Pauline O'Connell (1925-2021)

Pauline O'Connell (née Dunn) graduated with honours from UCD in the 1940s. She married fellow medical student Liam (Bill) O'Connell. In 1950 they emigrated to Boston, where she did a fellowship with Dr Mary Ellen Avery at Boston Children's.

Returning to Dublin in 1954, Bill became Ireland's first haematologist, and Pauline continued in paediatrics. As research fellow at the Coombe Hospital, her studies encompassed the effects of severe maternal anaemia, the impact of breech delivery on early childhood development, and outcomes of high risk pregnancies. Infants with complicated pregnancies or difficult births were at risk of adverse outcomes. The Assessment Clinic that grew out of these studies, supported by the Coombe, was Ireland's first to systematically follow up at-risk infants. This enabled early identification and prompt multidisciplinary team intervention if problems arose. She led this clinic until her retirement, and was an acknowledged expert on early childhood development.

Later, Pauline took on additional consultant duties in St Ultan's Infants Hospital, founded by Dr Kathleen Lynn. When St Ultan's closed, with her friend and colleague, Dr Rosarie Barry, she moved to the National Children's Hospital where, trail-blazing, they shared a single consultant paediatric post, one of the earliest such job-shares.

Pauline retired in 1990 but maintained her avid interest in medicine and paediatrics. As secretary, then President, of the UCD Medical Graduates Association, she attended the graduations of three grandchildren.

She was a Founding Fellow of the Faculty of Paediatrics RCPI. She was president of the Irish and American Paediatric Association, president of the RAMI Section on the History of Medicine, and an early champion of Dr Lynn as a pioneering medic and Irishwoman.

Into her 90s, Pauline regularly attended RCPI medical events, and in 2016 spoke about Kathleen Lynn extempore at the College's Easter Rising commemoration. Pauline endowed an annual lecture at the Haematology Association of Ireland to honour her late husband, Dr Liam O'Connell. She regularly attended to make the presentation.

Always interested in education, in the 1970s she undertook the management and ownership of Pembroke School, a small primary and secondary institution in Dublin 2, as it was threatened with closure. She and her children had been educated there. Pauline supported the head-mistresses and teachers, and ran the administration and finances until it finally closed in 2005. Many interesting people went there and Maeve Binchy taught there early on in her career.

Pauline lead an active social life well into her early 90s and was liberal in her politics. Life to her was a cause for celebration.”

Taken from Irish Medical Times - <https://www.imt.ie/features-opinion/an-appreciation-dr-pauline-oconnell-april-61925-february-5-2021-08-02-2022/>