

Cardiac surgery in the Republic of Ireland

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Introduction

The story of the development of cardiac surgery in Ireland is certainly very interesting. It begins with small programmes being developed in a multitude of sites, followed by a consolidation of personnel and resources, till, at one stage, all such surgery was effectively performed in a single unit. This trend then changed and, today, cardiac surgery is performed in seven separate institutions, with two more about to commence in the very near future.

The 1950s and '60s

In the 1950s and early 1960s, some heart surgery, though not necessarily the open heart variety, was performed in the following: the Mater, Baggot Street, St Stephen's in Cork, Merlin Park Hospital in Galway, Mercer's, Sir Patrick Dun's, the Richmond, St Kevin's, St Vincent's, the Rotunda and, almost unbelievably, Castlereagh Sanatorium in Roscommon. Others may be aware of even more such sites. Surgery on children was or had been performed in Crumlin, Temple Street and Harcourt Street children's hospitals in Dublin. By the mid-to-late 1960s, however, only the Mater and Baggot Street were still performing significant amounts of adult surgery, with Our Lady's Hospital, Crumlin, performing children's surgery.

Developments at the Mater

At this stage, two of the leaders in the specialty – Eoin O'Malley and the late Keith Shaw – took the enormous and highly praiseworthy step of pooling their resources, leading to the development of the National Open Heart Surgery Unit in the Mater Hospital. For the first time, significant resources, in the form of a new theatre block, were provided by the Department of Health.

In the next few years, co-operation between the new National Unit and Crumlin Hospital progressed to the stage where the unit in Crumlin began to increase the size and scope of its workload, mainly performed by Maurice Neligan, who had joined O'Malley and Shaw at the Mater. The first operations were performed in the new Mater theatres in 1971 and, over the next 30-odd years, a further seven surgeons were appointed to this unit, a number of whom also work in Crumlin.

By the early 1980s, the Mater Unit had grown in size to the stage where almost 1,000 adult open-heart operations were

being performed annually, making it one of the biggest units in these islands.

Further growth of services

Services were further augmented nationally in 1986, when new facilities were opened in the Regional Hospital Cork, with Tom Ahern beginning a fairly prolonged period as a single-handed surgeon. He has in more recent years been joined by two colleagues. In that same year, private facilities opened at two sites in Dublin – the Mater Private and the Blackrock Clinic.

Unfortunately at this stage, there was a huge backlog of work, with consequent extremely long waiting lists. This resulted in the Department of Health, in what were now more affluent times, providing new purpose-built facilities for heart surgery in St James's Hospital, which opened in 1999. A further private unit has been operational in the Galway Clinic for a few years now and, as I write this, we are about to witness the opening of a public facility in University College Hospital Galway and a third Dublin private facility at the Beacon Clinic. This means that, at the present time, there are seven institutions performing heart surgery in this State, with a further two about to open their doors very shortly.

Milestones

Naturally, there are a few notable milestones on this journey of development. The first coronary artery bypass operation was performed in the Mater Hospital in 1974 and it was the emergence of this particular operation that led to the exponential leap in the number of operations performed.

As with the rest of the world, transplant procedures have acquired a fame all of their own and Ireland's first heart transplant was performed in the Mater in 1985 by Maurice Neligan and Freddy Wood. This surgery gave rise to a very successful programme in the years since, accompanied more recently by the development of temporary mechanical heart and lung support systems. The first lung transplant was performed late last year and quite a remarkable number of such operations have been performed in the short time since.

Acknowledgements

During this period, many hundreds of doctors, nurses and



other support staff have made enormous contributions to the development and practice of the specialty of heart surgery. To list all of these would, of course, be virtually impossible, but it is very pleasant to record that the names of Eoin O'Malley and the late Keith Shaw live on in the units in the Mater and St James's that have been called after them. Cliff Dawson, who was the first perfusionist along with the late Mary Slavin and did so much to develop the service, is remembered in a prize named after him by the Society of Perfusionists of Great

Britain and Ireland, of which he was, in fact, the founder member.

Conclusion

From small, but curiously widespread beginnings, cardiac surgery in Ireland has grown steadily over the years. Initially, this was through a phase of consolidation of resources and, more recently, a much more widespread distribution of these services has come about. No doubt its future will be equally fascinating.