

The origins of the Irish Heart Foundation



Professor Risteárd Mulcahy, Consultant Cardiologist and founder and former President of the Irish Heart Foundation.

Origins

The Irish Heart Foundation was launched in 1966 in Jury's Hotel in Ballsbridge. The launch was attended by Eamon de Valera, the President of Ireland, Seán Lemass, the Taoiseach, and by Donagh O'Malley, the then Minister for Health. Other political and civic leaders also attended; Dr Paul White, who was the founder of the American Heart Association and, famously, General Eisenhower's physician, came with some friends from the United States. It was he who inspired the concept of a heart foundation where medical and lay people could unite to combat the ravages of the cardiovascular diseases that prevailed in Western society in the middle of the last century.

I was the Irish representative on the committee of the British Cardiac Society in the early 1960s. I was present when the British Heart Foundation was established at the behest of the Society. The British initiative was quickly followed by the Irish Cardiac Society and it was our group of cardiologists who, in late 1964, made the decision to follow with an Irish Heart Foundation. We followed this decision by setting up a working group of medical and lay people to draft its constitution, to determine the functions of the Foundation and to attract appropriate funding. The group included four medical and about six lay people drawn from various walks of commercial and professional life in Dublin.

Early years

Overcoming the financial problems posed the greatest challenge for the working party, but after much discussion, the courageous decision was made to employ professional fundraisers. The concept of professional fundraising had only arrived in Ireland shortly before and was first employed by Clongowes Wood College.

The Irish Heart Foundation was the second organisation to avail of this form of funding and we were fortunate to collect enough to launch the Foundation within 18 months. Within a year of the launching, we raised enough funds to buy 4 Clyde Road as headquarters for £16,000. The Foundation was housed for its first year in the garden flat of 3 Clyde Road, which was in the joint ownership of my colleague Oliver McCullen and myself. I need hardly say that many thought us extravagant to

pay such a big price for No. 4, particularly as the adjoining No. 3 had been acquired two years earlier for £12,000!

The Foundation was launched with its new constitution and its executive committee, led by the president, who was *ex-officio* its chairman. We had a lay honorary secretary and honorary treasurer, and a mixed lay and medical membership. The president was granted a tenure of six years, but at a later date the tenure was reduced to three years, as it remains at present.

The Foundation was unusual among international foundations in that its activities in its earlier years were confined to health promotion and cardiovascular disease prevention. This policy was established because of the critical situation which existed then, where coronary disease had reached epidemic proportions, and because the finances available to us did not permit support for clinical research or services as well as the health promotional activities.

Foundation initiatives

Shortly after the Foundation was established, the highly successful mobile Mediscan programme was conceived and began operations. It covered almost the entire country during subsequent years and remained active with a high profile until 1994. The screening programme was conducted by nurses specially trained in counselling and in identifying patients' risk factors for cardiovascular disease. The screening included a blood pressure check, cholesterol estimation, a smoking and aerobic exercise history, and a weight check. Apart from the beneficial effect Mediscan had on individual behaviour, the service had an important publicity role in informing the public and the medical profession about the feasibility of the preventive approach. It was the first glimmerings of a campaign to encourage healthy living and it coincided with the beginning of a real improvement in the life expectancy of the Irish population.

The Foundation organised hypertension detection clinics countrywide at supermarket outlets and community centres. Like Mediscan, these clinics were staffed by trained nurses. Information about desirable lifestyle changes was provided as part of the process. These clinics commenced in the early 1970s and they still continue in Cork and a few other scattered areas.

Health promotion and disease prevention

The essence of the Irish Heart Foundation's policy on health promotion and disease prevention was unique among foundations worldwide. Other foundations put the emphasis on support for clinical research and service rather than on public health promotion. The American Heart Association was unusual in that, from an early stage, it supported clinical research and service, as well as heart disease prevention. It was the example of the American policy that encouraged us to adopt the preventive approach, particularly because of our limited resources.

Our early policies in this regard were not popular with some of our colleagues who thought that the Foundation should be encouraging clinical services and research, rather than espousing public health information, but in hindsight, and because of Ireland's suitability for epidemiological research, we certainly made the correct decision at the time. We were also influenced by the support of Dr Paul White, whose classic book *Heart Disease* was first published in 1937 and ran into many editions subsequently. His book was unique among publications by cardiologists because it emphasised the importance of exercise and lifestyle in the prevention and treatment of heart disease, as well as providing an authoritative account of diagnosis and treatment. He continued to show his interest in our Foundation long after his visit to Dublin in 1966 and on his behalf I travelled on a few occasions to other countries in Europe with the objective of encouraging the heart foundation movement there.

The Foundation today

Much has happened since those early days. We now have a vibrant organisation with links to the Irish Cancer Society, the Health Services Executive (HSE), the Health Promotion Unit of the Department of Health and Children, the American Society of Hypertension (ASH) and other non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This expanding network is playing a most important part in improving the health of the Irish people, as is exemplified by our national smoking control policies and the adoption of healthier

lifestyles, particularly by the more educated among our population, although much yet needs to be done by our NGOs and government in relation to aerobic exercise facilities and in the area of nutrition. On these two issues, the government has been less than active in following the Foundation's concerns about the looming obesity problems that are only too evident today. Above all, much needs to be done in the realm of general education.

The Irish Heart Foundation, with its many committees dealing with various aspects of heart disease prevention and treatment, and its full support of the medical profession and the public, can be proud of the part it has played in leading the current reduction in heart disease and stroke mortality, and in the dramatic increase in life expectancy we have witnessed in the last 30 years.

Acknowledgements

It would be impossible to list all those, both doctors and lay persons, who have contributed to the success of the Irish Heart Foundation. I must mention Professor Seán Blake, Dr Gerry Gearty, Professor O'Conor Ward and Mr Barry O'Donnell, who joined me on the working party that set up the Foundation. Gerry Gearty, in association with the inimitable Noel Gleeson, played the principal role in organising a most successful mobile coronary care service, which served the city well for many years. This service was established shortly after a similar system was organised in Belfast by Frank Pantridge. We cannot forget the much lamented Noel Hickey who was so influential in forwarding the Mediscan programme, in promoting the health promotion policies of the Foundation, in training our many loyal and devoted nurses, and in doing so much valuable epidemiological research. Ian Graham and David Kilcoyne also contributed their share of energy and expertise to this valuable work.

Elsewhere, we provide a list of the presidents who led the Foundation during the last 40 years with such distinction and of the directors who administered the organisation with such dedication and competence.



Inaugural meeting IHF, 20 May 1966. Council and guests:

L/R. Back row: Mr Albert Baer, International Cardiology Federation; Mr HF Murray; Mr Frank Griffin SC; Dr WJ Cowhey; Dr Brendan O'Donnell; Dr RSW Baker; Dr Graham Hayward, British Heart Foundation; Mr Declan Dwyer; Mr MD Mc Guane; Mr DM Candy; Dr JF Dempsey; Mr CF Myerscough; Mr JB Carr; Dr O Conor Ward; Mr D Mulcahy; Dr GF Gearty; Mr Brian Clancy

Front row: Liam Cosgrave, Leader of Fine Gael; Viscount Elveden; The President of Ireland, Eamon de Valera; Dr Risteárd Mulcahy; An Taoiseach, Seán Lemass; Minister for Health, Donagh O'Malley; Professor James F Meenan; Dr Paul Dudley White, President of the International Cardiology Federation



The President of Ireland, Eamon de Valera, with Dr Risteárd Mulcahy, President of the Irish Heart Foundation, and Viscount Elveden. Inaugural meeting, Irish Heart Foundation, May 1966



1975. Mediscan nurses. **L/R. Back row:** Kathleen Kirwan, Kate Sheeran, Sheila Mc Gloughlin. **Front row:** Marie Maume, Kay Harte, Noeleen McCabe

Cover Image: 1970, The Cardiac Ambulance Service was set up as a pilot study by the Irish Heart Foundation.

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