

**OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN  
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND**

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

**PROFESSOR PHILIP NOLAN** on 1 December 2016 in the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Medicine, *honoris causa*, on **DR RHONA MAHONY**

A Sheansailéir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle, is mór an onóir dom agus is cúis bród dom an Dochtúir Rhona Mahony a chur in aithne daoibh, mar dhuine, mar chliniceoir, mar thaighdeoir, mar mhúinteoir, agus mar cheannaire.

Dr. Rhona Mahony has many things to recommend her, not least of which is that she is a proud Northsider. She grew up in Raheny, the youngest of three. Unable to understand why she could not attend school like her older siblings, and unwilling to accept this manifest injustice, she “badgered her mother” to allow her to go, and thus, at three years of age, Rhona began her educational journey in the Holy Faith in Clontarf, where she continued until she completed her Leaving Certificate at age 17. Rhona remembers these formative years as happy ones, idyllic even, a happy and loving foundation for what has proved to be wonderful life. She was and is a maker of friends, and her friends from her schooldays remain her closest friends to this day. She loved sport, enjoying tennis and running in particular, and describes herself as a tomboy. She was captain of the Maywood army at age six, defending the lower half of Maywood Crescent against the formidable forces of the Fordes and Naughtons, in the sort of hand-to-hand urban street fighting that trained and hardened soldiers fear, and while she did not pursue a career in the military, it showed an early aptitude for leadership, strategy and tactics which may have proved useful in more recent times.

She always wanted to be a doctor, and chose to study medicine in University College Dublin. She recalls with great admiration and affection her teachers, specifically her mentors and subsequently her colleagues in obstetrics Colm O’Herlihy, Michael Foley and Malachy Coughlan; the paediatrician John Murphy; and the physician Muiris Fitzgerald. Clinicians of exceptional skill and humanity, researchers of international repute, and teachers of great clarity, kindness and attentiveness, they inspired and empowered Rhona, as they did me, and

many others, to pursue excellence and realise her full potential. Rhona will always take the opportunity to acknowledge their importance. Her time as an undergraduate student in the National Maternity Hospital Holles Street, on that very special, disciplined and transformative rotation led by the aforementioned Colm O’Herlihy, proved to be a pivot point in her career, and from the time she delivered her first baby she knew she would be an obstetrician. She graduated with the primary medical degrees MB BCh BAO in 1994, then went on to specialise in obstetrics, specifically maternal-fetal medicine, with periods of postgraduate training in Galway and Birmingham, becoming a Fellow of the Royal college of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, before being appointed to a consultant position in her clinical home, the National Maternity Hospital. She became an accomplished researcher, was awarded the MD degree in 2005, and has over 70 publications of international importance. The ethos of the UCD School of Medicine, and of her mentors, clearly informs her view of research. Of research, she has said *“I don’t think it’s just important, I think it’s your duty. You must always be contributing and pushing back the boundaries of what we know”*

While achieving all this, she and her husband Daragh raised a wonderful family of four, Lorna, Sarah, Daragh and Hugh. She is open and candid about the trials and strains faced by young people building a professional career, the particular challenges faced by women, and the inevitable pressures and rewards in simultaneously raising a family. The true partnership between herself and Daragh has been essential to achieving a balance. When people ask her how she does it all, she is known to respond “Well I don’t actually”, acknowledging that there are two of them in it, and the support of the other has been essential to the achievements and equanimity of each

She was appointed, in January 2012, as Master, that is, Chief Executive, of the National Maternity Hospital, the 17th master and the first female master since the foundation of the hospital in 1894, and the first female master of a maternity hospital anywhere in Ireland. This is an extraordinary achievement. It is a rare individual who has, on the one hand the clinical proficiency, research accomplishments and teaching ability, and on the other hand, the leadership and management skills, to lead a large teaching hospital, in this case one of Europe’s largest maternity hospitals where over with 800 staff and delivering around 10000 infants annually. Rhona demonstrably is one of these rare individuals. She has taken to the role with gusto, founding the National Maternity Hospital Foundation to raise funds to support the work of the

hospital, honing her vision and leadership through an Eisenhower Fellowship in 2014, and leading major strategic developments, in which domain the very recent agreement between the National Maternity Hospital and St. Vincent's Healthcare Group providing for move of the National Maternity Hospital and the co-location of maternity and acute adult health care on the Elm Park site is testament to her leadership and will prove to be one of her most important accomplishments.

What is most important about Rhona Mahony is her humanity and authenticity, and in this her family her early years and in particular her parents Don and Una must have been formative. What matters most to her is people, women, children, family, friends, mentors, her staff. It is her relationship to them as people, and the ethic of that relationship, that are her moral compass, a compass to which she is courageously and steadfastly true. When it comes to her professional life there are two things that matter: in her own words "*what is good for women, and what is good for the hospital*".

We have to face a reality that we do not yet live in a society where women are equal. Women face barriers and injustices, not least of which are that childbirth may not be as safe as it should, that women may not feel as safe or cared for as they should, and the reality that a convoluted legal framework and a polarised public debate govern women and the relationship between women and their carers. Rhona Mahony is in this context a clear, expert and courageous voice, vindicating the rights of women, and advocating to give every child every chance to flourish. It is a voice which we are fortunate to have, a voice that remains honest and steadfast in the face of criticism or distortion, and a voice which, if listened to, will make our country a better and safer place for women and children.

Courage must come from the heart, and that heart is present in all of Rhona's actions and utterances. Even in what might normally be the rather sterile and uninspiring context of the 2014 Annual Report of the National Maternity Hospital her priorities are clear: announcing the imminent installation of two MRI scanners, funded through the aforementioned Foundation, she celebrates that they "*will end the journey of tiny babies and pregnant women across the city for scans and will provide huge opportunity for important research.*" The individual person is central.

Dr. Rhona Mahony, for your achievements and humanity as a clinician, researcher and teacher, and for your courage and authenticity as a leader, it is my great honour to present you for the degree of Doctor of Medicine, honoris causa.

**PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE  
UNIVERSITAS:**

**Praesento vobis, hunc meum filium quem scio tam moribus  
quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur,  
honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in Doctoratus in  
Medicina, idque tibi fide mea testur ac spondeo totique  
Academiae**