

Marymount

A Service

Without Walls

When **Dr Tony O'Brien** (MB, '80), Medical Director of Marymount Hospice, made the decision to train in palliative medicine in 1986, he was taking a leap of faith. Today, Marymount occupies a unique place in the lives of the many people touched by the services it delivers.

BY MICHELLE MCDONAGH

Chatting over coffee in the canteen at Marymount, Tony is never more animated than when talking about his patients. "Our job in palliative care," he explains, "is simply to do all we can to help people live full, meaningful lives, even in situations where life expectancy is short. This involves managing pain, controlling symptoms and providing psychological and spiritual support for patients and their families, so they can live the life they chose, in the manner and setting of their choice, for the duration of their natural life. Many people wish to remain at home for as long as they can, and our nurses support them, in collaboration with other community service providers, to do this. Marymount gives a service without walls."

Tony has seen many changes in palliative care over the years. The most fundamental of these is the move from exclusively end-of-life care to a more integrated approach where high-quality palliative care is combined with standard oncology care from the first moment of diagnosis. This approach is now best practice in the management of cancer patients with metastatic disease. Palliative care has also moved from an exclusive focus

on cancer care to include all patients in need, irrespective of the underlying pathology. The great challenge facing the next generation of hospice professionals is the care of patients with dementia. The model is quite simple: "care when it is needed, where it is needed, and for as long as it is needed," he says.

"In my general medical training, palliative care was something that was not addressed directly and yet was an integral part of our work. In the early 1980s, Dr Michael Kearney, who was working in end-of-life care at St Christopher's Hospice, London, came to Dublin to give a presentation on his work. That was a life changing moment for me. Listening to him, I just knew this was the path I was meant to follow."

Tony went to London where he began training in palliative medicine at St Christopher's Hospice. "Palliative medicine was recognised as a specialty in the UK in 1987. I was the first specialist registrar at St Christopher's when it happened. I had the privilege of working alongside Dame Cicely Saunders, the founder of the modern hospice movement. She was a remarkable woman."

On completion of his training, he was appointed to the post of consultant physician in palliative medicine at St Christopher's. In 1991, he returned to Ireland to take up his current post at Cork University Hospital and Marymount University Hospice, the second consultant in this field to be appointed in Ireland. Dr Michael Kearney had been appointed to the first such post at St Vincent's Hospital, and Our Lady's Hospice in Dublin in 1989. The specialty of palliative medicine has grown rapidly in Ireland from two consultants in 1991 to over thirty today.

Tony made an application to the Irish Medical Council for specialty recognition, with support from colleagues in Ireland and the UK, and in 1995, palliative medicine was recognised by the Irish Medical Council. "Ireland was only the second country worldwide to do this. We are still very much at the forefront in informing the development of palliative medicine across the globe. I was extraordinarily lucky to come into the specialty at such a critical time in its development. We had a unique opportunity to grow palliative medicine organically in Ireland - we started with an almost blank canvas. Our experiences have informed the development of the specialty all over the world," he said.

Tony chaired the National Advisory Committee on Palliative Care, which published its report in 2001. Launched by the then Minister for Health and Children, Micheál Martin TD, the >



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report was described as the ‘blueprint for the development of palliative care in this country’. Ireland was the first country in the world to produce a national plan for palliative care that was adopted as government policy and remains

policy to this day. Subsequently, Tony was appointed as chairperson of the inaugural National Council for Specialist Palliative Care.

Developments in Ireland started to attract some interest across Europe. Modestly, he explains: “I was invited to serve on a Council of Europe Expert Committee on Palliative Care in 2001 and was appointed chair.

We produced a report that ten

years later continues to provide direction and support to countries in the development of their individual palliative care services. Ireland really has had an enormous influence on the development of the specialty throughout the world. When governments, particularly in Europe, want to develop their services, they look to Ireland for models of service delivery.”

Almost a decade ago, Tony was joined by his consultant colleague Dr Marie Murphy. Together they developed a world-class facility to replace the old ‘St Patrick’s’ that had served the people of Cork since 1870. “The new Marymount, which opened in September 2011, is virtually unrivalled in terms of its infrastructure and facilities. When we open our full complement of 44 beds by the end of 2013, it will also be one of the biggest hospices in Europe. The magnificent building provides the backdrop for the delivery of individualised, high-quality care. But the life, heart, and soul of the place evolves from the people – our patients.”

The needs of patients and their families are at the heart of Marymount’s philosophy. “We are not primarily concerned with managing disease, which is a pathological reality, but with caring for the person. No matter how technologically advanced medicine may become – and I have witnessed some extraordinary achievements and developments in my career – the practice of medicine is always a social act. We need more humanity in medicine,” he says.

The facility at Curraheen is staffed by a full interdisciplinary team and reflects the highest standards of service provision. It owes its existence to the generosity of the people of Cork and to key partners such as Atlantic Philanthropies. Marymount Hospice has forged

strong partnerships and friendships with UCC, the HSE, the healthcare sector and of course, the local community.

Marymount also incorporates an elaborate educational and research department. “We are growing our educational activity and we attract an increasing number of students both from home and abroad. Both undergraduate and postgraduate students attend at the hospice,” he says. Tony is keen to develop more interdisciplinary learning. “Our philosophy is that education should be experiential and students should be taught in a multidisciplinary setting. As part of this initiative, my colleague, Dr Catherine Sweeney, and others are developing more material for online access. By means of blended learning programmes, students may access material at a time convenient for them.”

From the early days, UCC has been very keen to include palliative care education in the curriculum, and since the early 1990s, medical students have had exposure to palliative care principles and end-of-life ethics. Since 2007, the university has offered an inter-professional Diploma in Palliative Care which Tony would like to see developed into a master’s programme. “Ultimately, the aim is to ensure that all healthcare students at UCC have structured experiential exposure to palliative care training. No healthcare student should complete their studies without meaningful engagement with and exposure to palliative care.” Indeed, Marymount hospice and UCC are at the forefront of education in palliative care nationally and internationally.

Tony has served as National Specialty Director in Palliative Medicine, and was the first Irish physician to serve on the board of the European Association for Palliative Care. Marymount University Hospice is one of the longest-serving training sites for specialist registrars in the country, and together with UCC, is represented on the All-Ireland Institute for Hospice and Palliative Care – a consortium of health agencies and universities working together to improve the experience of supportive palliative care in Ireland.

“If you ask people what hospice and palliative care is, the first thing they are likely to say is ‘care of the dying.’ But there are not two distinct populations in the world, the living and dying, there is only one: the living. Everything we do here at Marymount is about enhancing and enriching life. It is a joy and a privilege to journey with people at this most precious time in their lives.” ■