

Sir Dominic John Corrigan

Born: 1802
President: 1859-1864
Died: 1880

Sir Dominic John Corrigan was an outstanding Irish physician who excelled in many ways but who is particularly remembered for his studies of haemodynamics. The abnormal 'collapsing' pulse of aortic valve insufficiency is named Corrigan's pulse after him. He was President of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland for five years, and oversaw the purchase of the current premises of the College in Kildare Street, Dublin.

He was born on Dublin's Thomas Street on 2 December 1802, the second of five children. His father, John Corrigan, a devout Catholic, was a shopkeeper who sold hardware, including agricultural implements, in his shop on Thomas Street and the family also had a small farm in Kilmainham. Corrigan's education benefited from the Catholic emancipation which had started in Ireland at the end of the eighteenth century. He attended the Lay College that was part of St Patrick's College, the Catholic seminary in Maynooth, which had been established in 1795. He excelled there and was particularly interested in the natural sciences, mathematics and physics, something that assisted him later in his studies of haemodynamics.

Corrigan was encouraged to pursue a career in medicine by the medical attendant at St Patrick's College, Edward Talbot Kelly, who recognised his ability and with whom Corrigan did an initial apprenticeship. From Maynooth, he went on to study medicine at the School of Physic in Trinity College Dublin, gaining practical experience in Sir Patrick Dun's Hospital and the Sick Poor Institution, a dispensary in Meath Street, Dublin. At Trinity, Corrigan came under the influence of James Macartney, the enthusiastic Professor of Anatomy and Surgery. While Corrigan was there, he took part in body snatching to provide cadavers for anatomical studies in Trinity, removing the bodies of recently buried paupers from their unmarked graves, an experience he later described in an article in *The Lancet*. As was the customary practice at the time, Corrigan then went on to study at Edinburgh Medical School, where he obtained an MD in 1825, at the same time as William Stokes (qv).

Corrigan returned to Dublin in 1825 and set up a private practice at 11 Ormond Street. Even at this early age, he was determined to achieve prominence as a physician, a daunting task for a Catholic in Ireland at that time. As his private practice grew, he moved to 12/13 Bachelors Walk in 1832 and then finally to 4 Merrion Square West in 1837. He initially worked with the sick poor and did not have a hospital appointment. However, after his early work on aortic disease was published in *The Lancet*, he was eventually given the post of Physician to the Charitable Infirmary



in Jervis Street in 1831. During his career, he was also Physician to Maynooth College, the Sick Poor Institute and the House of Industry Hospitals.

His work with Dublin's poorest inhabitants led to Corrigan specialising in diseases of the heart and lungs, and he lectured and published extensively on these topics. His article, 'Permanent Patency of the Mouth of the Aorta', was published in the *Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal* in April 1832. It included his classic clinical description of aortic incompetence and the diagnostic 'collapsing' pulse, which later became known as Corrigan's Pulse; and the powerful pulsation of the carotid arteries causing ear movement and/or head nodding, a sign of aortic regurgitation, which became known as Corrigan's Sign. In fact, the first comprehensive account of aortic regurgitation had been written in 1822 by Thomas Cuming, Physician to the Dublin General Dispensary and the Wellesley Fever Hospital, and Lecturer at the Richmond School of Medicine. His paper entitled 'A Case of Diseased Heart with Observations' was published in the *Dublin Hospital Reports* of 1822 but passed unnoticed until it was highlighted in an article in 1967.

In 1840, Corrigan became Physician to the Richmond Hospital and wrote a clinical description of pulmonary fibrosis. Throughout his career, he was known as a very hard-working physician but especially during the Irish Potato Famine of 1846. He was granted an honorary MD from Trinity College Dublin in 1849 for his exemplary work, particularly during the Famine year. He was also a lecturer par excellence and author of many articles in the medical literature. Apart from those already mentioned, his best-known works were *Famine and Fever*, a pamphlet in which he tried, in 1846, to alert the authorities to the impending danger of epidemics, and *Lectures on Fevers*, published in 1853.

Corrigan was created baronet of Cappagh and Inniscorrig in County Dublin and of Merrion Square in Dublin City in 1866, because of his standing in the medical community and in recognition of his Famine work, but also in part because of his services to national education as a Commissioner of Education for many years.

Later in his life, Corrigan had political aspirations and he successfully stood for election to the British Parliament in 1870, when he was elected as a Liberal Member of Parliament for Dublin. In Parliament, he campaigned for the reform of education in Ireland and for the early release of Irish Fenian prisoners. He also supported temperance and the Sunday Closing Bill, which was thought to have antagonised the electorate and the powerful alcohol companies, and he did not stand for re-election in 1874.

Corrigan's advancement in his medical career was not without its setbacks. The College of Physicians, supposedly led by Robert Graves (qv), rejected his application for Honorary Fellowship in 1847. This was mainly because he had been on the Board of Health, which had offered doctors recruited to deal with the so-called famine fevers (infectious diseases associated with the famine) what they considered to be the paltry sum of five shillings per day. However, in



the same year, he became the first Catholic appointed Physician-in-Ordinary to Queen Victoria in Ireland.

Eventually, Corrigan outflanked his opponents in the College by taking the Licentiate examination in 1855, which gave him the right to become a Fellow. He was elected a Fellow in 1856 and President in 1859, the first Catholic to hold that office. During his presidency, the College purchased the site of what is now 6 Kildare Street and built its premises there. Corrigan was one of the chief contributors to the fund to purchase the original College building. His portrait by Stephen Catterson Smith hangs in what is now known as the Corrigan Hall in the College and a full-length statue of him, by John Henry Foley, stands in the Graves Hall. Corrigan also presented an ornate window to the College.

In addition to his medical work and appointments, Corrigan served as President of the Royal Zoological Society of Dublin, the Dublin Pathological Society and the Dublin Pharmaceutical Society. From the 1840s, he was a member of the Senate of Queen's University and in 1871 became its Vice-Chancellor. Corrigan was a member of the General Medical Council from its foundation in 1857 until his death. He was also a member of the Board of Glasnevin Cemetery and a member of the Daniel O'Connell Memorial Committee.

In 1829, he married Joanna Woodlock, the daughter of a wealthy Dublin merchant, and they had three sons and two daughters. He spent his leisure time at Dalkey in Inniscorrig, his seaside house. In his later years, Corrigan developed gout which restricted his walking. He suffered a stroke in December 1879 and died on 1 February 1880. He is buried in the crypt of St Andrew's Church, Westland Row, Dublin.

Sir Dominic Corrigan is reputed to have said: 'The trouble with doctors is not that they don't know enough, but that they don't see enough'. He is still remembered and honoured by his peers by the clinical names of his descriptions in medicine, Corrigan's Sign and Corrigan's Pulse.

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