

Desmond Canavan

Born: 1938
President: 2000-2003
Died: 2004

Desmond (Des) Adrian Canavan was born on 13 February 1938 in Whitehouse, County Antrim. He attended school at St Malachy's College in Belfast and subsequently graduated first place in his year in medicine from Queen's University, Belfast in 1961. Des was an outstanding student at the Mater Infirmorum Hospital in Belfast where he was awarded the O'Connell Gold Medal. After graduation Des continued his association with the Mater Hospital specialising in infectious diseases under the supervision of Professor Graham Bull. During this time, he was awarded MD for his research on the life cycle of the parasite schistosomiasis. In 1968, he was appointed as an NHS consultant to Purdysburn Fever Hospital, Belfast which evolved into the Belvoir Park Hospital. In 1997 infectious diseases services in Belfast were centralised in the Royal Victoria Hospital. Des made the challenging transition very successfully, flourishing not only as a driver for the development of the infectious diseases service but as a major contributor to general medicine at this busy hospital.

Des was admitted to Fellowship of the College in 1981. He thereafter had significant roles as clinical examiner, council member (1993-2004), Censor (1993-1995), Director of Examinations (1996-2000) and President (2000-2003). To each of these appointments Des brought his characteristic traits of quiet assurance, a friendly leadership style and consistent effectiveness. As Director of Examinations he was responsible for extensive reform of the Membership examination. These changes included a revised format, enhanced validity and reproducibility and wider access at home and abroad. Under Des's guidance the numbers taking the Membership examination increased greatly, its status was raised and this enhanced the standing of the College.

Any description of Des Canavan's contribution to Irish medicine would be defective if it did not note his contribution to the Corrigan Club. This club eponymously honours one of the most illustrious Presidents of the College, Sir Dominic Corrigan (qv). It was founded in 1960 through the efforts of Ivo Drury (qv) of the Mater Hospital, Dublin, and D. A. D. (Dad) Montgomery of the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast. These two endocrinologists met for the first time at a meeting of the Association of Physicians of Great Britain and Ireland in Cardiff. At this time, there was little dialogue between the two jurisdictions in Ireland. These men resolved to address this unhappy situation at both a medical and social level. The remit of the club was to foster cross border medical collaboration at all levels and to nurture friendships. From the small start of just thirteen members from the 'South' and thirteen members from the 'North', the membership grew, always maintaining the numerical balance, and it has delivered successfully on both objectives. Des was



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elected a member of this prestigious club in 1976. He enthusiastically embraced the entire philosophy of the club and in 1992 was elected to the office of Secretary-Treasurer. He served in this position for six years, the period of its most successful phase. Success was certainly due in large part to Des's input but it was also at a time prior to the full development of the all-Ireland specialty societies and politically motivated violence was an ever-present threat. In this role Des developed an extensive knowledge of the health care systems on both sides of the border and gained familiarity with many of the personalities who provided their leadership.

When Des came unopposed to the presidency of the College in 2000 he was well prepared by his experiences as a consultant physician, as a Council member and as Director of Examinations but also by the very different experiences as Secretary-Treasurer of the Corrigan Club. During his term as President the main thrust was to develop comprehensive training programmes in all the specialties of medicine as well as in obstetrics, paediatrics, pathology, public health and occupational medicine. This immense task was successfully delivered and provided the foundations on which these programmes have developed to this day. The College was also preparing for the most extensive restoration project undertaken since it first occupied the premises at 6 Kildare Street in 1864. Unhappily Des did not survive to enjoy the successful completion of this project in 2006. He died in 2004 just over a year after demitting office.

Nuala Canavan, nee Malloy, was a frequent visitor to the College through the years of Des's various roles and particularly during his presidency. Delivering simultaneously and efficiently the responsibilities of an NHS consultant in Belfast and President of the College in Dublin required much support. A great deal of this was supplied by Nuala. They met when Nuala was nursing in the Mater Hospital, Belfast and they married in 1964. They had two daughters, Anne who is an anaesthetist and Marie Therese who is a nurse.

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